

10¢

44 Western

MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER

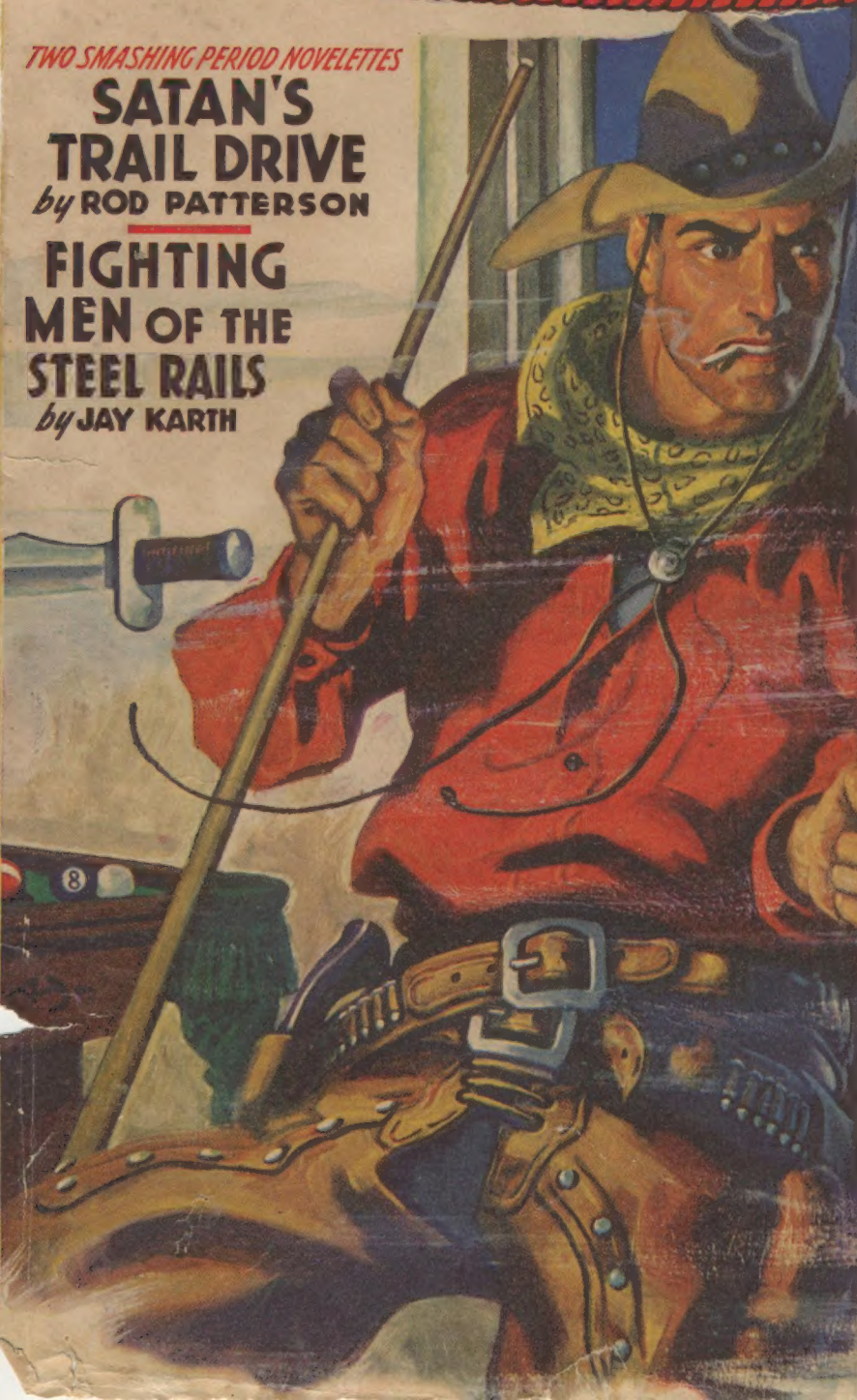
TWO SMASHING PERIOD NOVELETTES

SATAN'S TRAIL DRIVE

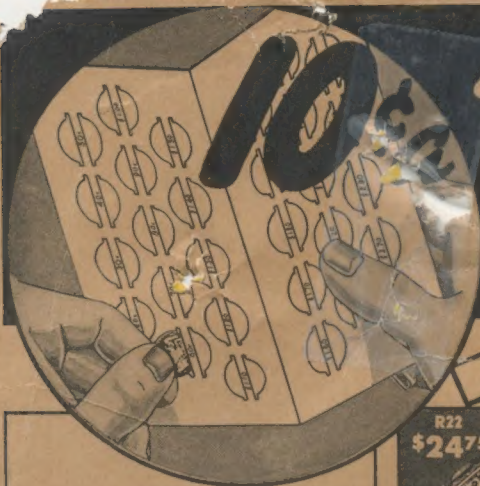
by ROD PATTERSON

FIGHTING MEN OF THE STEEL RAILS

by JAY KARTH



J. E. GRINSTEAD
WM. F. BRAGG
CLAUDE RISTER
T. B. THOMSON
RALPH BERARD



Day buys a Watch

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ELGIN

GRUEN

KENT

BENRUS

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ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

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\$2475

M17
\$2475

R22 - Ladies'
BULOVA; 17 J. 10K
yel. gold plate. \$24.75
M17 - Man's BULOVA; 15 J.
10K yel. rolled gold plate
case; bracelet. \$24.75
\$1 deposit \$2.38 a month

L140
\$3750

S141
\$3750

L140 - Ladies'
ELGIN; 17 J. 10K yel.
gold filled case. \$37.50
S141 - Man's ELGIN—sturdy
10K yellow gold filled case;
17 jewels. \$37.50
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P143
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K166
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P143 - Ladies'
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Guaranteed. \$15.95
K166 - Man's KENT. Guarant-
eed. 10K yellow rolled gold
plate case; 7 jewels. \$15.95
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T67
\$2975

O68
\$2975

T67 - Ladies'
GRUEN. 15 J. 10K yel.
rolled gold plate. \$29.75
O68 - Man's GRUEN Ver-
ithin: 15 jewels; 10K yellow
rolled gold plate. \$29.75
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K273
\$1975

K273 -
Service Watch -
new radium dial, easy-
to-see. 7 Jewels, sturdy
10K yellow rolled gold
plate case. Made espe-
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\$1 deposit \$1.98 a month

T567
\$1975

O564
\$1975

T567 - BENRUS for
Ladies. 7 jewels, 10K
gold plate; bracelet. \$19.75
O564 - Man's BENRUS: 17 jew-
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plate; leather strap. \$19.75
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Every man likely to go into military service, every soldier, sailor, marine, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to 6 times private's or seaman's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW!

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Dept. 1JS9 National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

Age.....

Name.....

Address.....

City.....State.....

I Trained These Men at Home I Will Train You Too





44 Western

MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

NO REPRINTS

Vol. 7

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Mikes of the World

and, the advertising executive, was a class-A, big-city go-getter. As we had known him, he was one of the busiest, most active men we had encountered. He was dynamic and energetic, and he hewed to the line. His business, with Mike.

At the moment he hopped out of bed in the morning until late at night, he said goodbye to his last guest and turned in for a few hours of much-needed sleep, Mike was on the go. He never had time for any reading, except a quick survey of the newspapers on the way to and from work. When he and his wife entertained, or went out in the evening, the chances were about ninety-nine to one that they would have one of Mike's clients (or prospective clients) in tow. His work was his life.

His wife didn't seem to mind it. At least, we never heard her complain. But it always seemed a little pathetic that her personality had to be entirely submerged in the demands of Mike's work whenever they were together.

On the two-by-four terrace of their apartment Mrs. Mike had what she called her garden. She took all the care of it, daytimes, when Mike was away at the office. Because of the limited space, of course, she couldn't grow very much. But she always managed to produce an impressive display of morning glories by mid-summer. And for two or three years she nursed along a rose bush that bravely blossomed in that little niche high above the bustle and grime of the metropolitan streets.

Like many another New York housewife, most of whom have no more than a window box or a flower pot on a fire escape, her "garden" was her one pitiable contact with God's green earth. Yet it was a contact.

The other evening we stopped around to see Mike and his wife. A stranger came to the door. No, she said, Mr. and Mrs. Mike didn't live there any more.

They had moved out six months ago. Sorry, she didn't know where they could be reached.

A couple days later a letter from Mike arrived, under the postmark of a small upstate hamlet. He had given up his job, bought a farm, and returned to nature—and was having a wonderful time!

There are hard days ahead, for Mike and his wife. They know that, and are prepared for them. They don't mind the work. After the first month, their arm and back muscles no longer ached every night. They at last feel thoroughly caught up on the sleep they lost in the city. Mrs. Mike has a real garden now, an acre plot that keeps the kitchen supplied with fresh green vegetables. After the day's work is done, now, Mike has time for reading.

"It's the real life!" Mike wrote. "You ought to try it."

He's one hundred percent right. It's the life every red-blooded, city-bred person, since the beginning of time, has hankered for. There's adventure, excitement, and a chance to prove your strength, in striking out to a new frontier.

What Mike and his wife are doing is pretty much the same as was done by thousands of young couples from the Eastern cities in the Seventies and Eighties. They had little preparation for the unknown that lay ahead—little but their high hopes, their courage, their faith in themselves, and a willingness to work. But that was just about all they needed.

Mike and Mrs. Mike have to worry about mortgages and taxes. The Mikes and Mrs. Mikes of two generations ago had to worry about Indians and the hundred and one perils of the trail. Condi-

(Continued on page 8)



YES, BROTHER...

LIFE GOES ON!

"Take it from me, brother—I know!

"Seems like yesterday, I was buddies with another young chap in the shop. One day at lunch hour, he said to me, 'Ted, I figure the only way to get ahead on this job—or any other—is *training!* Why, if they offered me a foreman's job today, I couldn't handle it. Don't *know* enough! But I'm going to learn! I'm signing for an I. C. S. Course!'

"I said I might do the same—but while I was hemming and hawing, the old world was moving along . . . *fast!* Today, my old buddy is General Superintendent, and I'm still on the same old job!

"Brother, Life won't wait for you! If you're going to amount to anything, ever, the time to start is *right now!*"

That's a sad story—but true! Don't let it happen to you! Start *now* to get the specialized, up-to-date training that will make you eligible for the bigger, better paying jobs in your field. The coupon below will bring you complete information on the International Correspondence Schools—the Schools that have helped hundreds of thousands of ambitious men to better jobs. The time to act is NOW!

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(continued from page 6)

aged, but the need for the courage and strength remains the same.

Some immemorial, young blood was sent out for the mysteries and adventures beyond the horizon. Dangers never deterred the young men who have heard the siren call of the open trail. Rather, the risks and perils have beckoned them on, like a heady tonic.

There would be little of glamor to a frontier that had no dangers. What attraction would it hold for the daring young adventurer who yearned to prove his mettle? It would reduce a man's life to a humdrum, little different from the time-clock existence of a city-dweller.

Perhaps it would be inaccurate to say that the cream of the West's early settlers were men (and women) from the Eastern cities. But one thing we do know: that in many wilderness settlements they were the ones who became the leaders.

The reason for this is not hard to find. It took a special kind of courage and faith and earnestness for a city-bred man to chance all on a condition of life so alien to his own. Only the ones with the strongest hearts dared try it. The weaklings and doubters were weeded out at the very start. The men who laughed at the talk of perils and hardships ahead were the ones who went with the covered-wagon caravans.

From St. Louis, New Orleans, Nashville, Chicago, Philadelphia, Richmond, New York, from a score of safe, settled, orderly cities, they struck out for the wilderness, in answer to the call of the West. Compared with the farm boys and the sons of back-country trappers, they were inadequately fitted for the out-trail life. Few of them knew how to wield an axe, turn a furrow, distinguish the tracks of a white-tail deer from those of a prairie wolf. They had to learn the countless expedients of life in the open.

But the greater their original handicaps in that one line, the greater their promise in another. By the very nature of their choice, they were men of decision, men who were not afraid to try something new, men with unshakable faith in themselves and in their ability to overcome any odds. Of faith like theirs, leaders are born.

It doesn't require the help of astrologers, palm readers, numerologists, mystics, or prognosticators from any of the numerous branches of the occult sciences, to make a prediction about Mike and Mrs. Mike, our friends the 1941 pioneers. Barring accidents, the example of our city-bred trail-breakers of the Seventies and Eighties gives us a pretty good idea of how they'll turn out. They'll make the grade—for they have the courage to try.

And, while they're about it, they'll live like human beings instead of robots. They'll be breathing clean air, the sun will have a chance to reach down into their veins and warm their blood; when they sit down at the supper table they'll have the hearty, healthy appetites of folks who have done an honest day's work.

More power to the Mikes of the world, we say. They may get sidetracked for awhile, but eventually they'll see the light and go out and get what they want. Today and down through the centuries, there have been thousands of his kind, doing much the same as Mike has done—and our hats are off to them all! We envy them. Maybe some day we'll have the gumption to follow their bold example.

As a token of our sentiments, we are entering Mike's name on our roll for a complimentary subscription to *.44 Western*. Now that he has time for reading, it seems that the least we can do is to provide him with reading matter. And we have an idea that in *.44 Western*, devoted to the fiction of an earlier race of pioneers who knew what they wanted, he'll find a kinship with red-blooded men of purpose who talk his language, and whose aims and actions he can fully understand.

THE EDITOR

I'm Drafting Me

-WHO WANT NEW BODIES

*and in just 15 minutes a day
I'll prove I can make you*

**A
NEW MAN**

I'M "trading-in" old bodies for new! I'm taking men who know that the condition of their arms, shoulders, chests and legs—their strength, "wind," and endurance—is not 100%. And I'm making NEW MEN of them. Right now I'm even training thousands of soldiers and sailors who KNOW they've got to get into shape FAST!

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**Now As Never Before You Need a Body That's
Ready for ANY Job in National Emergency!**

"GOD BLESS AMERICA"—yes, we all pray that. But it's the BODIES of America's MAN-POWER that must make that blessing safe. Where do YOU fit in? Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you want the help I can give you—the help that has already worked wonders for others, everywhere?

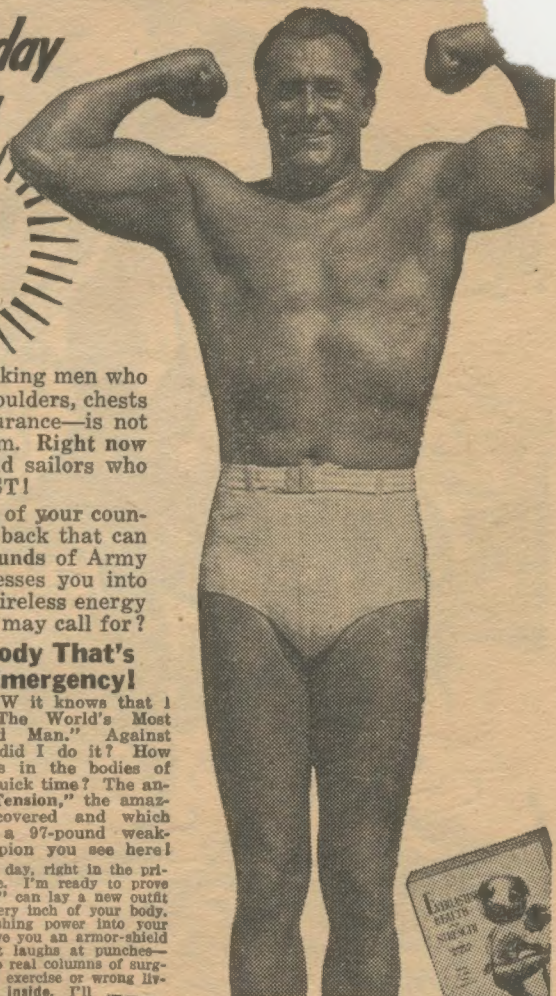
All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-lb.

weakling. And NOW it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in such quick time? The answer is "Dynamic Tension," the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that "Dynamic Tension" can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened your inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

FREE BOOK 61 PHOTOS
FULL FACTS
GET IT NOW!

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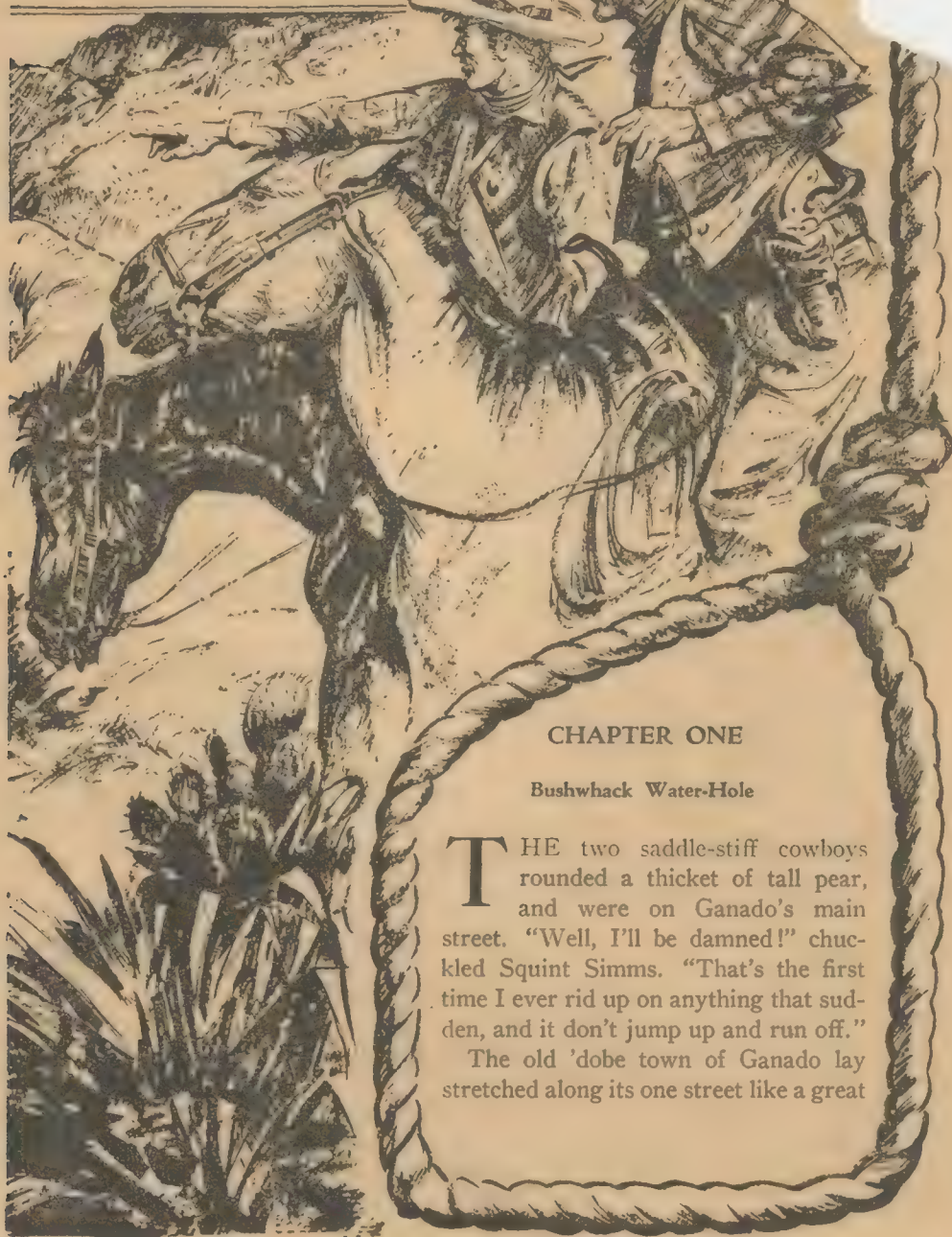
THE GUN-REFORMATION OF HOWDY GRIMES

J. E. Grinstead

A Smashing
Cowland Novel



From Montana to the prickly pear country of Texas, Howdy Grimes rode seeking peace and quiet. Then, in an odds-on saloon fight, he hired out at a dead man's wage—for a one-to-five range-war that could bring peace only in a lonely cowboy's grave!



CHAPTER ONE

Bushwhack Water-Hole

THE two saddle-stiff cowboys rounded a thicket of tall pear, and were on Ganado's main street. "Well, I'll be damned!" chuckled Squint Simms. "That's the first time I ever rid up on anything that sudden, and it don't jump up and run off."

The old 'dobe town of Ganado lay stretched along its one street like a great

the scorching sun.
was a knot of horses
soon, with their bridles

Grimes and Squint Simms
the ground and barged into the
like a couple of thirsty cows at a
water-hole. Then they stopped dead, at
the front end of the bar. Squint had "rid
up" on something that almost made him
jump up and run.

A big, arrogant, red-whiskered hombre,
sided by three tough looking punchers, was
laying down the law to a rancher who stood
down the bar by himself. The big fellow
had his back to Howdy and Squint.

"I been wanting to see you," he bel-
lowed, trimming his remarks with ruffles
and flounces of exceedingly vicious cuss
talk. "I sent you word that they ain't no
more water at that Box B water-hole than
my H Bar H cows need. You been driftin'
them Diamond S cows of yo'n in there,
and—"

"I didn't know you had bought the old
Box B land, Tate," said the rancher in an
apologetic tone. He was not a small man,
but he looked small by comparison. The
other, Tate, was all of six feet two.

"I ain't bought it," yelled Tate. "No-
body can git title to that land, Cal, and
you damn well know it! They's heirs that
can't be found and—"

"Well," Cal shot back, "it ain't fenced.
It's in the wide open outdoors, and my
cows has got as much right to drink
there as—"

He didn't finish. Tate struck with a
mighty fist.

Howdy's right leg swung out, and
looked as long as a lariat rope. It was long
enough for his spur to catch Tate's shin,
and jerk his foot from under him. Tate
went down, carrying the Cal hombre with
him. The three punchers grabbed for their
guns.

"Hold it, gents!" called Howdy. "I
ain't seen a good fight in some time, but

I'd sure admire to. I'd damn well ad-
mire to."

And Tate Homan's bodyguard held it.
They saw that Howdy and Squint each
had a gun out, and their eyes meant busi-
ness. The fight on the floor went on with-
out interruption.

Howdy was not looking for trouble. He
was just maintaining fair play, as he had
done in a thousand fights around cow-
camps. In the cow-camps a likeable young
six-footer like Howdy Grimes could get
by with handling men like a lot of romping
pups; no one ever seemed to think any-
thing wrong about it. Now, he was referee-
ing this bout as if it were his divine right,
although he didn't know a man in the
house.

△ △ △

THE rancher, Cal, was out-classed
for weight, and knew it, but few
blows were being struck. Mostly,
it was clawing, clinching and wrestling.
Finally they got on their feet, breast to
breast.

Howdy had slipped their guns from the
holsters and lain them on the bar. He
grinned, as he saw Cal's hand slip around
Tate and grab a handful of Tate's cor-
duroys just over the hip. Cal had remem-
bered a trick of his boyhood days. The
next moment, Tate went over Cal's head,
and fell with a thud.

When he got up, he was through. He
backed away and snarled at his men, "I
thought you fellers was goin' to keep the
dogs off."

"Too many dogs," said one of the
punchers, who apparently hadn't much
taste for the dirty deal that had been
framed on Cal. The plan had simply been
for them to hold guns on Cal, while Tate
beat him up.

Howdy Grimes, still smiling, picked up
the guns and returned them to their own-
ers. Squint's eyes always looked as if he

expected something to break in his face. They were blinking faster than usual now.

Tate shot a glance at the long, lanky puncher, who was his top gunman. The man shook his head—and that fight was over.

"All right, gents," called Howdy. "We ain't had ary drink till yet. Everybody join us, and forget that little ruckus."

"Go to hell," growled Tate. "We don't drink with water thieves. I want you to get this straight, Cal Stone. You ain't goin' to git away with stuff like this. From here on out, me and my hands kill every damn Diamond S cow we see at that Box B water-hole. If you want to save any of 'em, you better round 'em up and drive 'em to water."

Therewith, Tate and his three men stalked out the door, mounted and rode out of town.

"Funny how bad a gent can talk just after somebody has licked the tar out'n him," grinned Howdy. "Join us in a little refreshment, mister."

"Calvin Stone is the name, and I want to thank you for—"

"That's all right. Glad to meetcha, Mr. Stone. I just naturally like to see a good fight. Fist fights beat gun-stuff, and settle more bad trouble. I'm Howdy Grimes, and this is Squint Simms. We drifted in here looking for a nice quiet place to repent our sins, and maybe reform some, but it looks like we missed the trail. Here's happy days, and no dog-holes in the trail of life."

They had set their glasses down and were rolling smokes, when long, tall, raw-boned Bill Foley, the barkeep, said, "Cal, you have just about played hell now. Tate Homan has been telling it around for a week that the first time he seen you he aimed to make you crawl. What ever made you ride into a trap like that?"

"I never heard anything about it," declared Cal. "Didn't know Tate was mad at me. But even if I had known it, I

wouldn't of brought with me, like Tate did. A hole can make more trouble for men than anything on a woman, but if there's any killin' water, it won't be my fault."

"Maybe so," said Bill, "but—Cal. I'm yo' friend. I don't aim to a the rights of this thing. I'm just stating the facts when I tell you this. If you don't round up yo' cows and drive 'em there'll be killin' over this mess, and—it won't be a fair fight like what you had with Tate just now. Tate Homan's got a big outfit and you got a little one, and Tate don't take chances. He's been in these old thickets for a long time, and he's apt to fight thicket fashion. You know what that means."

"I reckon you're right, Bill," said Cal Stone, "but I ain't got the hands to drive—Say, do you two gents want a job? It won't last long. Just until I can drive my cows fifty mile to water. It may rain before I get 'em there, but I'll do anything to keep from havin' killin' trouble."

"Well," drawled Howdy, who did most of the talking for the firm of Howdy and Squint, "we do work sometimes, and a job of runnin' from trouble would just suit us. We got into this section by mistake. If we can get out of it by follerin' your cows to water, we'd admire to do it."

"Fine. Let's take another drink. Then I'll go to the bank, and come back here for you."

When Stone was gone, Bill Foley set to polishing his bar furiously.

"What's wrong with Cal Stone?" asked Howdy.

"Nothin' wrong with him," Foley said. "He owns twenty thousand acres of the best grass land on this border, but in a bad drought like the one we got now, his water plays out. The only water-hole in this section that never goes dry is on the old Box B lands, that lies in between Tate's land and Cal's land. Cal ain't afraid to fight, but he ain't got a chance. He ain't got but

...d you two makes eight.
...got thirty, and they are
...mostly fellers that is wanted
...side by the Rangers, and on
...side by the Rurales. So they
...back and forth acrost the Border."
...hands plumb desperate and awful,"
...stunned Howdy. "Where is this water
that we aim to drive them Diamond S cows
to?"

"Rio Grande River, fifty miles south of
here," replied Bill. "Worst trouble about
it will be getting the cows out'n them Rio
Grande thickets when Cal gets ready to
bring 'em home. If he don't watch 'em
close, half of 'em will be stole and run into
Mexico."

Howdy cut his questions short. He and
Squint went out and stood near their
horses, waiting for Stone.

"Why, Howdy, you ain't trembling
none," said Squint. "That Bill Foley
skeered me something awful, but he sorta
overplayed his hand. It's plumb plain that
he belongs to Tate Homan, and his job is
to scare Cal off'n his range, but— How-
come you horn into a mess like that? Don't
you know that if them cows is round-eyed
and bawlin' for water, nobody on earth
can drive 'em away from the home range?"

"Shore, I know that," admitted Howdy,
'but— Aw hell, Squint! This feller Stone
is in a tight, and we got to help him. Any-
way, the Diamond S is right on the road
to where we are going. . . . Yonder comes
Mr. Stone, now."

△ △ △

THE Diamond S was west of Gana-
do, and the trail crossed the Box B
land, passing by the disputed water-
hole. It was prickly pear country all the
way to the water, except an opening a few
hundred yards across, right around the
lake. Just before reaching the opening,
Stone pulled up, and his two new hands
came alongside him.

"I want you to get this thing straight,
fellers. I don't want no killin' over this
water. I'd rather lose my whole herd than
to kill one man. If you run into H Bar H
riders, talk fair to 'em, and tell 'em we
aim to move the Diamond S cows just as
quick as—"

Cal broke off as a shot crashed out
ahead, followed by a volley that went on
and on. The three riders jumped their
horses into the open, and saw Tate Homan
and his three killers galloping about, pistol-
ing Diamond S cows.

For a man who would rather lose his
herd than kill a man, Cal Stone was be-
having strangely. "Damn Tate Homan to
the hottest corner of hell!" he yelled. Out
flashed his gun and in went his spurs, as
he rode straight for the pistoleers.

Howdy and Squint joined willingly in
the smoke-fest. Whether Cal Stone had
broken his word or not, within a few sec-
onds Tom Seale was dead, on the ground,
and the other two hands were injured and
fleeing into the thicket behind Tate, who
had not been touched. As they disap-
peared, Cal and his two drifters pulled up
in a bunch.

"Nice, peaceful country," chuckled
Howdy. "I thought Tate was just talkin'
with his mouth when he said he aimed to
kill Diamond S cows. I didn't know
there was any man on earth mean enough
to kill a cow-brute because it wanted to
drink."

"I don't mind the cows so much,"
snapped Stone, pointing toward the north
end of the lake, where a riderless horse
stood munching grass beside a man who
lay on the ground. "They've dry-gulched
pore old Painthorse Charley, as harmless
a man as ever straddled a horse, and— I
wonder where Eddy Stovall is. He always
rides with Paint."

They caught the old puncher's horse,
lashed his body to the saddle, and headed
on toward the Diamond S. Half a mile
west of the water, the pear thickets played

out, just before reaching the open ground of Stone's range. At the edge of the thicket stood another riderless horse. A badly wounded man lay on the ground.

"What happened, Eddy?" asked Stone, as he swung to the ground. "Did you and Paint start it?"

"No," replied Eddy, whose face was gray with approaching death. "Paint and me had watered our mounts and turned away from the water. Then Tate and them opens on us." His breath was coming in short gasps. "They got Paint while he was sayin' howdy. I caught a bullet in my gun arm, and tried to run out of it, but they hit me three more times before I reached the thicket, and—" That was all

her calmness, that imp
knew it was impolite to
he couldn't help it.

She was not looking at him, but father. "What happened, Daddy

"Tate Homan and his killers m
Paint and Eddy cold, at the Box B w
hole," he told her. "Tate claims the wat
and I was going to move my cows. . .
But now I don't know."

"Why, Daddy, that was nothing to kill anybody for," said Verna, judicially. "There must have been something else."

"Maybe there was," Cal Stone said wearily. "Run on back to the house, honey, and fix us something to eat. These boys are Howdy and Squint, two new hands,

THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING—

—they say, is in the eating. And the proof of Grade A fiction entertainment is in the colorfully dramatic stories you'll find in *Dime Western!* Watch for the big September issue, featuring a smashing complete novel, "The Pinto Basin Renegades," by Walt Coburn, the cowpuncher's own author! Plus other hard-hitting stories of the West That Was! At your newsstand August 1st!

for Eddy Stovall, the only young rider in the Diamond S crew.

CHAPTER TWO

Two Eyes for An Eye

IT WAS an hour later, almost noon, when they laid Paint and Eddy in the bunkhouse. They had just stepped outside to wash the bloodstains from their hands, when they heard a light step on the hard trail that led from the ranchhouse to the bunk shack.

Howdy looked up and saw Verna Stone. She was pretty enough, but not the prettiest girl Howdy had ever seen. There was more than mere beauty, though with her tall, queenly figure, golden hair and blue eyes, Verna would have seemed lovely to any romance-hungry cowboy. It was the strong look of courage in her face, and

but I ain't got any more help now than I had. I reckon they don't know how to cook."

Squint opened his mouth to say that he could throw some chuck together, but Howdy caught his eye and shook his head. Squint was thinking only that he didn't want the girl to cook for them. Howdy was thinking of something else, and it had blue eyes and golden hair. He was thinking, too, that almost any other girl would have gone into hysterics at the murder of two men whom she had seen every day for months, perhaps years. The only hurt she showed was in her eyes. There were no tears, but Howdy would have bet a million that they would come as soon as her back was turned. He was thinking that it would make it easier for her if she had something to do, like fixing up a batch of food in the chuckshack.

"Howdy," Cal said when his daughter

reckon Tate's head hit
 "I threw him there in
 something that made him
 "e," said Howdy. "You didn't
 them other three gents, and they
 crazy the same way Tate was. I ain't
 been in this section but a few hours, but
 I've learned right smart. Tate Homan
 ain't afraid that water will dry up. He
 knows there's big springs in that lake, and
 fifty thousand cows couldn't drink it dry."

"Springs?" said Cal. "I didn't know
 that. If the water can't play out, and Tate
 knows it, what makes him pull a thing like
 this."

"Well," drawled Howdy, "you been
 here all the time, and you ought to know.
 I got an idea that Tate Homan howls more
 about how honest he is than any man in
 these thickets. He'd probably hang a hun-
 gry man for stealin' a yearlin' to eat."

"You've got him right," said Stone.
 "Tate ain't any thief."

"Maybe not, but if you drive yo' cows
 into them thickets along the Rio Grande,
 half of 'em will be stolen and driven into
 Mexico. Then you won't need this good
 grass land, and you'll sell it cheap. Killin'
 two of your men and some of your cows is
 just a scare to start you to drivin' yo' cows.
 If Tate had been sure you was going to
 drive, he wouldn't have pulled that one,
 but he has showed his hand now, and has
 got to back it up."

"What can I do?" Stone asked help-
 lessly.

"Dunno," grinned Howdy, "but I'll tell
 you what you can't do, with less than a
 hundred men. You can't drive them
 starved cows away from the home range.
 My idea would be to push all yo' cows
 within smellin' distance of that water-hole,
 and let 'em go get a drink."

"Then I'd picket that hole, and get as
 many H Bar H riders as they get of yo'
 hands, and—"

"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a

tooth," quoted Cal, his eyes narrowed.

"Hell, no! I'd get at least two eyes for
 an eye, and a whole set of teeth for one old
 snag. You can win nothin' by just breakin'
 even with the other feller. If you and the
 other boys will push the cows in there,
 Squint and me will see that they drink.
 They may have to climb over a few dead
 H Bar H hands, but they won't be many
 kilt—I mean cattle."

"I won't stand for bushing Tate's
 hands," declared Stone.

"Shore not. We'll put Tate on notice
 that we aim to water the cows, and if any-
 body interferes he either gets kilt or kills
 us. That's fair, ain't it?"

"Yes, that's fair as anybody could ask."

"All right. Squint and me rides for that
 water-hole when you give the word."

"It's a desperate chance," Cal said
 thoughtfully, "but I'm in a desperate jam.
 Anyway I jump, I'm bound to lose. Come
 on. Let's go to the house and eat."

△ △ △

THAT noonday meal was not a com-
 plete success, so far as Howdy
 Grimes was concerned. The food
 was excellent and abundant, and Howdy
 had eaten at table with humans before, but
 somehow he couldn't swing the grub now
 as he did in a cow-camp. He saw Verna
 look at Squint, and study him as frankly
 as if he were a pony. He was sure that
 she looked at him the same way when he
 was not looking at her, and it made him
 uncomfortable. When he rose from the
 table, he thanked her politely, and was
 glad to get out of the house.

When Stone and his two drifters got
 back to the bunkhouse the other four hands
 had come in. They were all middle-aged
 men who had been with Stone for years.
 When Cal told them what had happened,
 they showed little emotion. It seemed to
 be all in the day's work. Cal told them to
 dig a couple of graves, and bury Paint and

Eddy. He told them to hurry it up.

Old Lake Potts, who was a sort of foreman, said, "What about the rest of the cows, Cal? There'll be a thousand of 'em dead in two more days if they don't drink something."

"I did aim to drive 'em to the Rio Grande, but—"

"Drive hell to Sunday School!" snapped Lake. "Nobody could drive them starved cows. If they was driv, they couldn't make it to the river. Most of 'em ain't had a damn drop of water in three days or longer."

"I'd orter driv 'em before now," said Cal, "but I didn't know Tate was goin' to pull a deal like this. All we can do is push 'em to the water-hole."

"Yep," said Lake. "That's the only chance. Maybe Tate will run outta cartridges."

"Howdy and Squint are going to ride for the water-hole, and keep the dogs off while the cows drink."

"Oh, they are?" growled Lake. "Hadn't we better just make that four graves while we are diggin'?"

"We'll dig the others when we need 'em," said Cal. "There's something else I want to tell you, Lake. You know I ain't easy spooked, but I'm spooked now. Not on my own account. If I was foot-loose, I'd get to Tate Homan as quick as I could, and one of us would be at peace with all the world. But I can't do it, on account of Verna. I don't want her to know it, but I don't aim to leave her here alone until this mess is settled. Men that kill starvin' cows because they want to drink, and drygulch the hands that tries to water 'em, will pester women, and—"

"Aw, hell, Cal!" said Lake. "Do you think it's that bad?"

"Yes, and worse. Get them graves ready as quick as you can. I'll saddle a horse for Verna, then come and help you. Soon as we get the boys buried, me and Verna will go with you and we'll bring in as many

cows as we can drive. .

Howdy and Squint had that conversation. They were on pens, roping out likely looking S horses, for a hard afternoon's ride could have helped with the grave. Howdy had told Stone they would when he gave the word, and he had not given it, so they waited. They saw him saddle a horse and take it to the yard gate, then go on into the house.

"If I was Tate Homan," Squint said, "I shore would hate to meet Cal Stone right now. Cal is so damn mad he's cross-eyed, and stumbles when he walks."

Cal reappeared in a few minutes. He crossed the yard to where Howdy and Squint squatted against the corral fence, waiting. "Here's orders, fellers," he said. "No bushing goes. Of course, if they jump you and run you into a thicket, you got a right to shoot from that thicket. Try to save as many of my cows as you can, but keep out of the way of bullets as much as possible."

Cal stumbled on to join the men who were digging the two graves in the loose, sandy ground.

"Them last few words was good advice, anyway," chuckled Squint.

△ △ △

AS THEY mounted, they heard a horse hitting the ground hard. Howdy turned his head and saw Verna Stone. Clad in range togs and Stetson, her lithe, boyish body swayed in the saddle as she took all the gimp out of a mean bronc, then trotted toward them.

"Howdy," she said, as she pulled up, "are you and Squint heading for the Box B water-hole?"

"Yes'm."

"I wish I could go with you. Dad didn't tell me, but I know he thinks it is dangerous for me here at the ranch."

"Well," drawled Howdy, wondering

to him instead of Squint, out on the range with him would be at that water-hole." "Now that. It—it doesn't seem quite for you and Squint to do that for when you don't owe us anything. If I can keep Tate Homan from killing my daddy I'll owe you a lot." She flashed Howdy a message from her blue eyes. "So long and good luck."

The next moment she was gone. She had spoken like a frank, friendly boy, but it was not a boy's look that she had given Howdy. It made him tingle. It did more than that. It tied him to the fortunes of Cal Stone and his daughter, whatever they might be and from all indications those fortunes would be plenty rough.

"Howdy, we ain't got as much chance at that water-hole as a two-inch cobweb has got in hell. If both of us together had as much sense as a locoed chipmunk, we'd of kept our saddles on our own horses, then tried to see how far we could ride before we starve to death."

"Oh, this ain't goin' to be bad," declared Howdy. "A man that does the things Tate Homan has done, is bound to be yaller. Call him good and hard, and he'll crawl like a snake. This ain't what I thought we was ridin' into, but now that we are here, I aim to save Cal Stone's cows—and Cal himself."

Squint shot his partner an odd glance. Howdy was always the leader. They were side partners, but what Howdy said usually went. Howdy could see a long way ahead, and he didn't always tell what he saw. He had a way of being right that made Squint willing to follow him anywhere, but just now Squint was unable to see anything ahead but plenty of trouble.

Howdy pulled up just before they reached the opening around the water-hole. They had been riding slowly and noiselessly. Peering out of the thicket, Howdy saw Tate Homan and one other man sitting their horses under a big mes-

quite tree. The partners were within fifty feet of the two men before they were seen. Homan and his man went for their guns.

"Hold it, gents," called Howdy. "Pull them guns, and you'll both have to be buried. That's right. Get yo' hands away from leather. This is goin' to be a gab-fest, and I do most of the augerin'. I'm puttin' you on notice that I'm goin' to water Cal Stone's cows at this water-hole."

"You are?" sneered Tate.

"That's what I said. I know and you know that they's big springs in that lake, and all the cows that you and Cal both have got couldn't lower it an inch in a week. So it's plumb plain that it ain't the water that you want. I ain't namin' what you do want, but I'm tellin' you this. Cal and his hands are pushin' all the Diamond S cows to this water-hole. Squint and me are going to water 'em, and—"

"You're goin' to play hell," snarled Tate. "You heard me tell Cal that I aimed to kill every Diamond S cow that comes here. That still goes. I reckon you can see 'em layin' around here."

"Yes," said Howdy, and his voice sounded hard and gritty. "I see 'em, and I seen the two Diamond S hands that you and yo' killers murdered cold. I'm putting you on some more notice. You are not on yo' own land. If you kill another Diamond S hand, or even another Diamond S cow, you're goin' to hang, and I'm goin' to pull on the rope. Now I'm goin' to call you by yo' first name. You are a dirty thief and a cold killer. Somebody shot Joe Brady from a thicket, to get this water. Who was it?"

Tate went white, and his hand shot to his gun. Howdy sat with his hands on his saddlehorn. There was a cold, fiendish grin on his wide mouth. "Go ahead and drag it out," he said. "I'll wait till your iron clears the leather, and then kill you. God knows I want an excuse to do it."

"You—you won't get away with this," choked Tate, taking his hand away from

his gun as if it burned. "I run this section of the cactus country, and they can't no damn drifter tell me how."

"No?" jeered Howdy. "Well, you heard the law. If you ain't got no more business here, you better ride. I hunt skunks and coyotes sometimes, and I might kill you two buzzards just for practice."

Tate swung his horse around, and his man followed. They spurred for where the Ganado trail entered the thicket.

"Howdy," drawled Squint, "you want to leave this sinful world and turn to an angel worse than any man I ever seen. You been holdin' the pearly gate open, and you still got yo' hand on the latch. If them fellers turn at the edge of that thicket, and—"

Whang! A gun barked, and the bullets cut the branches of a mesquite right over their heads.

"Fine," chuckled Howdy. "Cal said if they run us into a thicket we can shoot from it. Let's get into it pronto." They jumped their horses into the thicket, back toward the Diamond S, with bullets cutting brush all about them. This thicket was ten miles across, which gave them plenty of leeway, since Cal had not been specific in his instructions.

Howdy and Squint stopped and looked back. A gaunt, half-starved Diamond S cow staggered out of the thicket and reeled toward the water. A gun cracked, and the cow dropped, kicked a time or two and lay still.

"There's hell again," grunted Howdy. "Now I got to hang Tate, or be called a liar. Lucky I didn't set a date for the hanging. Come on and stick close to me. If you get lost in here they'll have to comb these thickets at the resurrection to find you."

Tate Homan and a dozen of his men were in the edge of the thicket, waiting for Diamond S cows to show up, and hoping to get a glimpse of the two drifters. Suddenly, guns crashed within fifty feet of

them. Two II Bar II m went down. In their surprise the gang, except Tate, mounts into the open. Two more dropped before they could get back to cover. Then they heard two horses running through the pear thicket.

CHAPTER THREE

The Big Thicket

A QUARTER of a mile away, Howdy and Squint pulled up. "Howdy," Squint said soberly. "ain't we sorter breakin' the spirit of Cal Stone's orders? That was dang nigh bushin'."

"He said if they runs us into a thicket we could shoot. They did, and we did. We are still in the thicket."

"I wish you'd tell me how you know yo' way about in here. I have poked cows in the mountains, foothills, badlands and dog towns all over the West, but if I ever batted my eyes in here I'd be lost. How come you know these thickets so well?"

"I'll tell you that some day when it rains," replied Howdy. "Right now we better get around to the west side of that water-hole. Cal and them might come bustin' in with some cows, get careless, and ride right into a flock of bullets."

It was sunset when Howdy and Squint got back to the other side of the little lake. They had not once been out of the thicket, so they could still shoot without overstepping their orders, but there was nothing to shoot at.

There was no wind, and the surface of the lake was like glass. A few hungry cows were drinking, and watching their reflection in the water. The night birds and the crickets had set up their evensong.

"What's the matter with you, Howdy?" snapped Squint. "I've spoke to you twice, and you didn't answer. Have you gone deaf?"

"No. I was just thinking. This time of

"es me feel queer. -It's the
at decent humans always go
ain't never had a home since
a kid."

"Huh," grunted Squint, who was not
etically inclined. "It's also the time of
day when it gets dark in these old thickets,
and a booger can grab you when you ain't
lookin'. Listen! I hear something now."

"Cattle running," said Howdy. "Them
fellers must of brought in one hell of a big
drag. Let's ride into this thick mot of
pear, so they'll go around us. When
starved cows smell water they ain't got
no sense a-tall."

The roar of cracking hoofs and knock-
ing horns was like thunder, as a thousand
thirst-maddened cattle streamed through
the thickets and on to the water. Within a
few minutes they had passed, and were a
spotted fringe around the water, like flies
around a plate of syrup. There was no
other sound but the rustling movement of
cattle, as the two men sat looking at them.
Diamond S cows were drinking, and not
a shot was being fired at them.

"Looks like maybe Tate Homan thinks
you meant what you said," opined Squint.

"I don't know what he thinks," said
Howdy, "but this is too quiet to be natural.
We better ease back toward the Diamond
S. Cal and them might ride in here to look
for us, and run right into the middle of
hell. Tate ain't ready to quit yet. There's
a booger after him, and he ain't got sense
enough to dodge it."

They had just crossed the range line
when they met Cal and the others. They
were, indeed, riding to look for the two
drifters. Howdy said nothing about any
fighting, but told them that the cattle were
drinking, and everything was quiet at the
lake.

"Thank God you are safe!" Verna said,
so suddenly and so fervently that every-
body looked at her. "I've been worrying
all afternoon about you two risking your
lives."

No one made any comment. There
seemed no more to say. Stone and his
party had their backs toward the Dia-
mond S, which was about a mile away.
Howdy and Squint were facing west, but
Howdy was looking at Verna.

"Look!" Squint broke out. "What is
that light?"

Cal Stone turned, and gasped, "My
God! The ranch is on fire!"

Within a moment everybody was riding
for the burning ranch. Verna was riding
a fleet horse, and she was well in the lead
by the time they had gone a quarter of a
mile. Suddenly Howdy sent his horse
ahead of the others, and gave chase. What
was in his mind no one knew. He was
riding a powerful horse, and the others
could not keep up. Halfway to the ranch
he forged up on the left side of Verna,
calling to her to pull up. She paid no heed,
and he caught her bridle with his right
hand.

"Let go my bridle!" she screamed. "My
home is on fire! I've got to get to it!
There are things that I must save."

Howdy still held on, and was slowing
her horse. She lashed him across the face
and hands with her heavy quirt. He clung
grimly to the bridle, circled her horse to
the right, and stopped it on the very brink
of a deep ravine. The others came up as
Verna sobbed. "You—you beast! I wish
Tate Homan had killed you. I—"

"Look out!" yelled Squint. "Into that
wash! Quick! Everybody!"

△ △ △

A GAINST the red light of the fire,
Howdy saw a dozen horsemen
storming toward them. Snatching
his carbine from the scabbard, he swung
to the ground, caught Verna from her sad-
dle. He ran down into the draw, carrying
the girl in his arms, as the others tumbled
down the steep bank. When he released
Verna she slumped to the ground, and

kept still. It looked as though she'd fainted.

Tate Homan was yelling, "We got 'em now, fellers! Give 'em hell! I'll teach 'em to bush my men!"

Tate was either not quite as yellow as Howdy thought, or else something had thrown a worse scare into him than Howdy knew, and he was fighting like a cornered rat. At any rate, Homan had made a tactical error. He and his men were on higher ground, and could be picked out by the firelight.

There were two carbines in that little wash that didn't miss. Howdy and Squint each tried his best to kill Tate Homan, and both failed, because they couldn't tell him from the others. Half of the dozen killers got away, some of them filled with lead. One of these, still untouched, was Tate Homan. The others were left where they fell, as Cal Stone and his party pushed on to the burning ranch.

Verna rode with her father from there

on, and said no word about her row with Howdy. The whole place was in ruins when they reached it. Lake Potts and the other three old punchers cursed Tate Homan in a steady undertone. Stone and his daughter set their horses a little apart from the others. Cal Stone was trying to console Verna, but both of them were so shocked by the loss of their home that they could hardly speak as they stared at the smoking wreckage.

Howdy Grimes pushed his horse near them. "Mr. Stone," he said, "you're takin' a mighty bad chance stayin' here. I don't know what there is between you and Tate Homan, but he is out to get you. If he comes back with another gang, and catches you ag'in' this firelight, you won't have a chance."

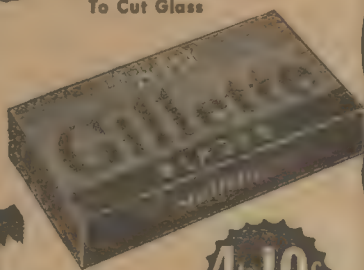
"Where—where can we go?" asked Stone, in a dazed tone. "This is all the home we have, and—"

"You can't hide here," said Howdy,

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"and if you don't hide Tate Homan is goin' to kill you. You-all don't know much about me, but if you'll trust me I can hide you until you have time to think things over, and decide what to do."

"Lead out," Stone said dejectedly. "We'll follow."

Howdy led south from the Diamond S. Squint was silent. Some things were turning over in his mind that he couldn't get straight. He knew Howdy was a square-shooter, but he was doing strange things here in these pear thickets. He talked about hiding, and that was not like him. Running from a fight was something that Howdy Grimes didn't do, and Squint didn't like the idea. He knew Howdy was not afraid. That very afternoon he had seen him call Tate Homan's hand, when there was every chance of his being shot to rags from a thicket while he was doing it. What was the matter with Howdy? How did he happen to know these thickets so well? He had never mentioned the border country until he suggested that they come south to avoid handling frozen ropes in Montana that winter. . . .

Howdy pulled up at the head of a draw, and they all looked back. Men could plainly be seen riding about the still blazing fire. Howdy had been right again. Tate and his killers had come back to finish the job. Stone made no comment. But the sight seemed enough to satisfy him and the others that their best bet was to follow Howdy, wherever he might lead them.

About three miles south of the Diamond S they crossed Stone's range line, and the open grass country played out. In front of them was a dark, towering green wall of giant pear. Howdy didn't hesitate, but rode squarely into the wall, with the others trailing behind him.

The last in the line was old Lake Potts. "I'll be damned!" he growled to himself as he entered the thicket. "I've knowed the Big Thicket for five year, but this is the first time I ever knowed that anything

but a javelina hog could get into it. Something queer about that Howdy boy. It comes too natural for him to lead a deal, and he bosses the spread without anybody knowin' he's doin' it. Queerest thing of all is that he's right most of the time. I wonder what the hell happened at that water-hole this afternoon—and I ain't apt to find out." Then the Big Thicket swallowed Lake, along with the rest.

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THE distance they went would have been about a mile in a direct line, but in going that mile they followed almost every point of the compass as they wound and twisted their way through the pear. At last they came out in an open glade of about ten acres.

In the middle of the glade stood a 'dobe shack with a thatched roof. A little way from it a campfire was burning, and a wrinkled old Mexican was bent over, putting fresh coals on the lid of a Dutch oven, while a blackened coffee pot and a pan of meat and beans stood at the edge of the fire. Howdy pulled up a little way from the fire, and the others stopped near him.

"Now, Mr. Stone," he said, "you and your daughter are safe for the present. Please don't ask me any questions about this place. I'll tell you all about it when the time comes." They dismounted and approached the camp. "Is the cabin clean, Tiofelo, and ready for company?"

"Yes, sir," said the old man, standing with his hat in his hand, as if he were before royalty. "Your letter said you would come today, and I was waiting and keeping the food hot for you. The letter said you would bring one friend, but you have brought—"

"Never mind that. Mr. Stone and his daughter will stay in the shack. Light the lamp in there. The rest of us will stay in the open." Then Howdy spoke rapidly in Spanish for a moment.

Cal Stone and Verna found the inside of the cottage freshly whitewashed. Clean bunks were in two corners, and there was rustic furniture, and a few books on a table.

"This ain't much of a place," said Howdy, who had come to the door with them, "but it's the best I can offer you. You'll be safe here until you can do better, and that's the main thing right now."

The light from the lamp fell on Howdy as he stood in the door. Verna saw the long, livid welt on the back of his right hand, then looked up at the others that marked his tanned face. Her lower lip quivered, and Howdy supposed she was thinking of her ruined home. He turned away.

They ate supper around the campfire. There was little talking, and Howdy kept his eyes on his plate and cup.

When the meal was finished, Stone and his daughter went to the *jacal*, their weary muscles yelling for rest. All of the horses were hobbled except those of Howdy and Squint. Lake and the other hands spread blankets, and were soon asleep. Two cigarettes glowed redly in the darkness, where Howdy and Squint sat on the ground near their still saddled horses, a hundred yards from the camp.

"You deal 'em too fast for me to call 'em," drawled Squint. "Slow up, and deal a few high ones."

"They've been all low cards in the game, so far," said Howdy. "This is the quiet place that I was heading for when we stumped our toes on Tate Homan, at Ganado. When that little mess was over, and Cal Stone yelled for help, I couldn't turn him down. You know the rest as well as I do."

"I reckon that's enough cards for one deal," said Squint. "What's the next move in the game?"

"You heard me tell Tate Homan I was goin' to hang him if he kilt any more Diamond S cows. Well, he kilt at least one, and—he done some other things, and I aim

to keep my word. Let's ride on, pard."

"Won't Cal and his hands complain if we don't let them in on the party?" asked Squint.

"I don't know, but they would only be in the way, and we got a lot to do."

That was all. A few minutes later Howdy and Squint eased out of the glade, and disappeared into the great thicket. . . .

The occupants of the cabin, and the men outside, awoke when the sun came up. There was a shallow well near the camp, and an old battered tin pan in which to wash hands and faces. Tiofolo had breakfast ready.

"Where's Howdy and Squint?" Cal Stone asked the old Mexican.

"I do not know, sir," replied Tiofolo. "They went away last night and—"

"What! Did they bring us into this trap and leave us, when they knew we couldn't find our way out?"

"No, sir. Howdy told me to tell you this. I don't know where he went, but he said he might never be back. He said that he would come back within three days if he could. If he does not come back within three days, I am to take you out of the thicket. If you insist, I am to take you out any time you wish, but he thinks you and your daughter will not be safe outside the thicket."

"Huh!" grunted old Lake. "I wish to be took out of here right now. If Tate Homan and his killers is still ridin' the Diamond S, I want to be out there mixin' some smoke with 'em."

The other men voiced agreement.

"I know how you feel, boys," Stone said. "I'd like to be out there myself, but I can't leave Verna here alone. We'll compromise on it some way. Let me think it over. If Verna wants to go out of here, I won't try to stop her."

When Stone told Verna what Howdy had said, to his surprise she flatly refused to leave the thicket until three days were up.

"I don't understand this Howdy Grimes," her father told her. "I thought he was just a drifter, and I guess he is, but how-come he knows this place, and how-come old Tiofolo expecting him. You couldn't get anything more out of Tiofolo in a year. Where did them two drifters go, and why?"

"I can't answer your questions," said Verna, "but—he'll be back. He must come back. God won't let Homan kill a man like Howdy Grimes." Her great blue eyes were very far away.

Cal gave her an odd glance. He had some doubts about that. Howdy couldn't be a better man than either Paint or Eddy, and Tate Homan had certainly killed them. It irked Stone not to be out on his own range, trying to salvage what he could from the general ruin. He wanted more than ever to meet Homan for just one little moment. He had definitely changed his mind about wanting no killing over that water-hole, but he had to get Verna to a safer place than this before he could call on Tate for a cold showdown. All he could do now was to wait. So they settled down in the cabin, each busy with thoughts of his own.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hangnoose to Order

HOWDY led south from the hidden glade in the Big Thicket. Squint asked no more questions. He would get the rest of the story when Howdy was ready to tell it. Just now, it was his job to follow.

It was far past midnight and they had gone ten miles, when the pear began to play out, growing only in detached clumps, on otherwise open ground.

Howdy pulled up at the edge of a considerable thicket. "Do you see anything, Squint?" he asked.

"Shore I do," said Squint. "I see the

biggest spread I've saw since I been in Texas. What outfit is it?"

"The H Bar H. You heard me tell Cal Stone that I would take a whole set of teeth for one old snag. Well, here's where I pull a few grinders, just for a starter. A day of reckoning is bound to come to a man that does the things Tate Homan does."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Squint.

"Just stay put and hold my horse, while I commit the worst crime on earth except cold murder." Howdy dropped to the ground and stole away toward the big ranch.

It was an old place. The pens and a big barn were to the west of the rambling house. Just west of the pens were big ricks of hay that had been put up for winter. The drought had been on for months, and everything was dry as tinder. A strong wind was blowing from the west.

It seemed to Squint that he had waited for hours. He was getting uneasy, and then there was Howdy, quietly sitting his saddle and saying, "We promised Cal Stone to water his cows. Maybe we better get back to that water-hole, and see how many Tate has kilt."

They had gone about a quarter of a mile, when they heard three quick shots. They pulled up at the edge of the dense thicket and looked back. Red tongues of flame were leaping into the sky, and great clouds of smoke rolled up over the ranchhouse, against the coming dawn.

"There's some more hell," chuckled Squint. "I'll bet four-bits a dang pack-rat drug a box of matches or the like into a haystack. I didn't know they had them kind of rats in Texas. Call 'em trade-rats in some sections. They'll drag off anything, but they always leave something in its place, if it ain't nothing but a stick, or a old piece of rawhide."

Howdy said nothing. His face was hard, and set like granite, as he watched the fire. The big bunkhouse caught, and then the

ranchhouse. They could see men running wildly about the place, and could even hear them yelling, but the wind tore their words to shreds.

"I reckon Tate knows how Cal Stone felt last night, now," observed Howdy. "I've heard of fighting the Devil with fire. I guess that's it. Looks like I pulled a few teeth that time. Let's head for the water-hole."

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GRAY daylight stole timidly into the opening about the placid water-hole, as if ashamed of what it saw there. All around the lake the ground was strewn with dead Diamond S cattle. Howdy and Squint stopped in the edge of the opening, and sat looking at the scene of carnage. One lone, gaunt, broad-horned cow stood bawling for her calf, which lay a few yards away, dead.

Squint looked around at Howdy, opened his mouth to say something, then stopped. Howdy had drawn the free end of his lariat from the coil, and was deftly tying a hangman's noose.

"Aim to hang that cow?" grinned Squint.

"I'll never untie this knot until it chokes Tate Homan," Howdy rasped. "There ain't room on earth for me and that buzzard. I been keepin' to the thickets too long. Here's where I ride in the open. Come on, and let's head for town and have some breakfast."

Bill Foley had just opened the saloon, when Howdy and Squint barged in for a drink. "Did you gents jump the job?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Did Cal decide not to drive his cows?"

"Yep."

"I shore hate that. Cal's makin' a big mistake."

"Shore," drawled Howdy. "He ain't the only one that has made mistakes in this

mess. You made one or two, yo' ownself. Come here to the door. I want to show you something." At the door, Howdy pointed to the noose, lying open on the top of his coiled lariat.

"Why, whut—what—" stammered Bill.

"That," explained Howdy, with a grin that would have shamed the Devil, "is an adjustable collar. I made it to fit Tate Homan's neck, but it'll fit any neck—even yo'n. You have been standing in with Tate, and trying to scare Cal Stone away from his good grass land. You better try standing from under, or you'll be hitched to something with a halter so short that yo' feet won't touch the ground. We are going to get some breakfast now. If Tate and his gang come in here, tell 'em we are in Old Diego's Chili Joint."

Bill Foley stood in the saloon door, running a finger around the inside of his collar, as the two drifters slipped their carbines from the scabbards, took them under their arms and went into the 'dobe shack that housed Diego's establishment. It was a little place, fifty feet from the saloon, on the same side of the street, with nothing but a vacant lot between them.

Howdy dragged a table to the middle of the chili joint, and sat down, with his face to the front. He kept his rifle across his lap. Squint took the other side, where he could watch the back door. Diego was alone in the place.

"*Carne, huevos y cafe,*" Howdy called to him.

"If that don't kill you, I'll try some of the same," said Squint, who knew no Spanish. Then, when the food came: "Aw, hell! It ain't nothin' but ham and aigs and coffee. I thought it was some kind of pie or the like."

When they were about to leave the table, they stopped and listened. They could hear the dull thud of hoofs in the sandy street.

Squint grinned. "There they come, and we are caught in a hole."

Howdy motioned Diego over. "Have

you been payin' the padre reg'lar?" he asked.

"Not—not too regular, señor," faltered the Mexican. "Me, I am a poor man, and—"

"Here's five dollars, and you can keep the change. Some gents are comin' in here to kill us in about a minute. If I was you, I'd slip out that back door and go to see the padre, until the smoke settles."

Diego could understand that. He was out the back door and gone, almost before Howdy finished speaking. Squint followed him to the door, closed it and barred it, then considered the thickness of the walls and the one small window at the back. Meantime, Howdy closed and fastened the front door. There was but one window at the front, and it was high.

They sat down and rolled smokes. This was a strange, new world to Squint. He had never seen anything like the cactus country of Texas border before, and nothing even remotely resembling some of the people who inhabited it. He didn't know that there was no place on earth where such loyal, deathless friendships were formed, and at the same time such bitter hatred felt and such ruthless killing done.

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WHILE Howdy and Squint were calm as they waited the next act in the drama, the same could not be said of the H Bar H men who had just ridden into town. Tate and a dozen of his men had barely reached the ground in front of the saloon, when one of them spied the Diamond S on the two horses hitched there, and the open hangnoose on Howdy's saddle. Tate went white, and let out an oath. Bill Foley came to the door.

"Who's in there?" asked Tate.

"Nobody, but you fellers better get inside."

They rushed to the bar, and drank like

thirsty cattle. Tate Homan's hand shook as he downed a double drink. That hangnoose had done something to his nerves. He had not forgotten what Howdy had said to him the day before.

He snarled at Bill Foley, "Who rode them two Diamond S bronks in here?"

"Them two drifters that Cal Stone signed on yesterday."

"Damn Cal Stone!" snapped Tate. "He ain't nothin' but a sissy. We've run him clean out of the country, but them two gun-slingin' hellions is something else. They— Bill, somebody burnt the H Bar H last night. They ain't a damn thing left but some ashes and a little barbed wire. I know Cal Stone and them old women that work for him didn't do it. They ain't got the guts. It's bound to of been them two drifters, and I aim to hang 'em."

"Well," grinned Bill, "one of 'em has got a hangnoose on his saddle. Said he made it to fit you, but I reckon he'd let you use it, if you beat him to it."

"Fit me!" yelled Tate. "Where are them two hellions at now?"

"They went into Old Diego's place to eat some breakfast, but I reckon they're through by now. My advice would be for you to let them gents alone until you get more help. If you do jump 'em, don't come back in here when you start to run. I don't want my place shot to hell."

Tate cursed Bill Foley. "More help, hell!" he roared. "This is all the help they left me. Damn yo' sorry soul, I've made you, and now you turn ag'in' me. I've got to take them fellers. One of 'em said things to me that no man can say and live. Come on, fellers, and let's get the job done. We'll hang that big drifter with his own noose."

"Wait just a minute, Tate," counseled one grizzled old thug in the gang. "I reckon I know as much about you as any man on earth. One thing I know is that you're on the losin' end right now, and this ain't no time to lose your head. Let's take

a few more drinks, and do a little thinking. We might just decide to ride out of this mess and let it rest for a while."

"Wiley," Tate said soberly, "they ain't many men that can come as near tellin' me what to do as you can, but this is one time that you can't do it. I didn't pay particular notice to that big drifter yesterday morning when I fought Cal Stone in here, but I got a good look at him when he called me yesterday afternoon at that water-hole. He looks just like— If you seen him, you'd be in just as big a hurry to send him back to hell where he belongs, as I am."

"You—you mean—*him*?" stammered Wiley.

"Yep," nodded Tate. "No mistake about it."

Wiley bolted a heavy jolt of whiskey. "Let's go," he snapped.

CHAPTER FIVE

Out of the Gunsmoke

"A LL right, fellers," yelled Tate. "Half of you go to the back, and the rest of you stay at the front with me. You head the ones at the back, Wiley. Don't kill Old Diego if you can help it. He makes mighty good chili."

Grim-faced old Wiley took his men and went to the back of the house. He looked like a gaunt gray wolf, bent on the kill. He was, in fact, the bravest and most

dangerous man in Homan's whole gang.

"Huh," grunted Tate. "They got the door stopped up. Maybe they done kilt Diego. Hey, you two buzzards! Come out with yo' hands up, and we won't hurt you. We just want to ask you some questions."

There was no reply to that. Tate turned loose and cursed them, using every vile epithet that he could lay his tongue to, and he knew them all. Still, no voice came from that closed shack.

"Throw some slugs in at that window," yelled Tate. "Maybe they can understand that."

A storm of lead swept in through the window, and bullets ripped through the door, tearing off long splinters. Howdy calmly counted the volleys, as he and Squint lay on the floor, close under the front window. When six had been fired, the guns stopped. As they did, the two drifters rose, one on each side of the window, and went into action. Three men went down, but Tate Homan was not one of them. He was keeping well out of the angle of fire, to one side of the saloon. The three men left at the front began shelling that window again, as the defenders of the pitiful fort dropped back to the floor.

The hangnoose, and what Tate had said to him, had set old Wiley raving mad, though no one else could understand what it meant. He knew he had to kill the big drifter, or the chance was good that he,



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as well as Tate Homan would wear a noose. With Wiley were five other venturesome, reckless border desperadoes. They had found a heavy timber, and were trying to smash the rear door. Squint crawled to the little back window, rose in the corner, and threw a handful of lead out the window at an angle that would sweep the men with the timber. One went down, and Wiley got a slug through one hip. Two of his men grabbed him and dragged him out of the line of fire.

Howdy had got hold of a long knife, and was standing in the front corner, boring away at the soft 'dobe wall. The knife went through. He rounded the hole and peered out, to see four men lugging Wiley into the saloon. He could see Tate Homan, and hear him cursing, but he didn't want to kill Tate. Two of the four who had carried Wiley inside came back. That is, they started back. That hole in the old shack smoked, and one of them fell. The other sprang to where Tate Homan stood.

Five of Tate's twelve men were dead, and old Wiley was out of the fight. Two men had stayed in the saloon with Wiley. Four were out there with Tate, making a futile effort to shoot the door down.

Bill Foley came to the saloon door and yelled at Tate that Wiley was badly hurt and wanted to see him. Tate sprinted for the saloon. He was under Howdy's gun-sights for thirty feet, but no shot was fired. Tate's remaining four men got lonesome and decided that they, too, would go inside. One of them made it. The other three fell by the wayside.

"I wonder if them gents ever seen a badger fight in a barrel," said Squint, in the silence that followed.

"Load your guns and get set," ordered Howdy. "We'll go in there and settle this mess, before they get over what has already happened to 'em. There's only three in there besides Tate and Bill Foley. I don't think Bill wants to mix in, since

he seen that noose. Kill the others if you can, but don't kill Tate. I don't want to waste that noose. Here we go."

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THEY had laid Wiley on some blankets at the back of the saloon. When Tate reached the wounded man, Wiley told the others to stand back. He wanted to talk to Tate alone.

Bill Foley was the first to see Howdy and Squint as they sprang in at the front door of the saloon. He dropped behind his bar. The three drinkers went for their guns, but they were too late.

At the crash of the first shot, Tate, who was stooping over Wiley and listening to what the old outlaw was saying, spun around and jerked his gun. A carefully directed bullet passed through his gun arm, and the six-shooter clattered to the floor. Howdy stopped a few feet from them, while Squint kicked the gun out of reach of Tate and Wiley.

"You damned buzzards burnt my house last night," snarled Tate.

"Shore we burnt it," said Howdy. "I was afraid you wouldn't find that out." That devilish grin was on his lips again. "You burnt the Diamond S, and we burnt yo' lousy thief nest, but that don't make us even for all the cows you kilt."

"Bill!" yelled Tate. "Why the hell don't you kill these two buzzards?"

Bill had risen from behind his bar and was looking this over critically. He shook his head. It looked to him as if Tate was on the losing end.

"Which one of you two hellions potted Joe Brady, of the Box B, from a thicket?" rapped Howdy.

"Wiley done that," blurted Tate.

"Yes, damn your sorry soul, I did do it!" croaked Wiley. "And you paid me a thousand dollars for the job. If I had a gun I'd blow you to hell for tellin' it, to save your own dirty hide. If you want

it told, I'll tell it right. I killed Joe Brady, and then you and me rode the thickets with a mob of cowmen that wanted to hang the killer. Finally, you and me and two others of our outfit find a poor devil of a renegado, hang him, and you give it out that he confessed the killing. I'll tell, too, that the pear has took yo' range, and you wanted to run Cal Stone away from his grass land, so's you could grab it. Now you tell one."

Tate Homan was speechless with fear by that time. He whirled and started for the back door. Howdy tripped him and he fell with a thud. Howdy glanced up at that beam again, and nodded toward the front door. Squint went out, returning a few moments later with two ropes. . . .

Fifteen minutes later Howdy and Squint stood at the bar, taking a drink. The bodies of Tate Homan and old Wiley were swinging from the beam.

"Yo're safe, Bill," Howdy informed the saloon keeper. "You ain't worth a rope or a cartridge. We are goin' to ride now."

Squint walked to the door and looked back. Then Howdy walked to the door. It was no go. Bill Foley gave them no excuse to kill him. Howdy selected a good rope from the saddle of an H Bar H horse, and they mounted and rode off.

Squint was in the lead, now. Howdy rode with his head bent in deep thought. The happy smile and cheery words that had given him the nickname of "Howdy" were gone.

When they reached the edge of the opening around the lake, Squint pulled his mount to a stop and said in a low tone, "Look out, Howdy. Some more of Tate's killers are out there on the job again."

"It's old Lake and the other hands," said Howdy, when he had got a better look. "I didn't think they'd stay holed up in that thicket."

A few minutes later, when the six of them stood in a group, Lake said, "There's

a hundred Diamond S cows lyin' dead around this water-hole."

"I know it," said Howdy, "and they've got to be moved, or they'll ruin the water. Pitch yo' twine onto the light ones, and we'll drag 'em into that deep pocket on the ease side of the glade. Then we'll double on the heavy ones, and drag 'em off."

"And get shot to shoe-strings from that thicket," growled Lake.

"There's nobody to shoot from that thicket," Howdy said. "Come on."

It seemed natural and easy to take orders from Howdy. And one look at his face warned Lake to ask no questions. Diamond S cows were drinking peacefully when they left the waterhole.

△ △ △

TOWARD sunset the six men rode their weary horses back through the pear lanes to the little glade in the Big Thicket. Old Tiofolo had plenty of food ready, and they ate in silence.

Later, in the quiet of twilight, Howdy and Cal Stone sat on the ground together, a little way from camp, while Howdy told Stone what had happened.

"That's all there is to it, Mr. Stone," he finished. "Somebody burnt the H Bar H. Then somebody hung Tate and old Wiley, and cleaned up the rest of the gang at Ganado this morning. Nobody will every try to stop you from watering yo' cows at the Box B water-hole any more. You still got right smart cows and all yo' horse stock. Tifolo will show you the way out of the thicket in the morning—"

"But hold on," said Stone. "I want to square this thing with you some way."

"It's about square as it stands," Howdy told him. "I'll be drifting in the morning. I didn't sleep any last night, and if you don't mind—" Howdy dropped over on the ground and went to sleep.

Cal Stone walked slowly back to the cabin. Many unanswered questions about

this strange drifter were still in his mind.

Howdy slept until the sun in his face woke him. He raised up and saw the others eating breakfast. He circled to a shallow well in a gully fifty yards from the camp. There he stooped over and washed the sleep from his eyes in a battered tin basin. When he came up, with water dripping from his dark hair, Verna Stone was standing quite near.

"Ex— excuse me, ma'am," stammered Howdy. "Did—did you want to use the pan?"

"No," replied Verna. Tears were in her eyes now, but she looked at him bravely. "I want to talk to you. Every time I see those welts on your face, I feel the blow myself. I know you won't understand, but I must have been insane when I did that. My mother's picture and all the old things that she had known and loved were in that house. I felt that I just had to save them. I didn't realize what I was doing when I struck you. All I can do is beg your forgiveness. Won't—won't you forgive me?"

"That's all right, lady," said Howdy. "I reckon slashin' a driftin' cowhand with yo' quirt was about the same to you as lammin' a mean cow over the head to keep it out of a thicket."

"No, no! Please don't say that. You are not just a drifting cowhand—to me. You may not own anything but your saddle and gun, but you have more courage than any man I have ever known. Daddy said you meant to drift this morning. Why? Was it something that I did?"

"Yes'm."

"Let me apologize for it."

"You can't, lady. . . I don't reckon you ever put yo' last blue chip on the table, knowin' that if you lost you wouldn't eat. I aim to do that now. I did aim to ride, and not make the play, but I can drift just as well after I lose. If I lose, I don't want any breakfast—don't want anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Here goes the chip," grinned Howdy, the old smile coming back to his brown eyes, on account of something that he saw in Verna's blue ones. "I mean, if I can have you for a wife, nothing on earth can ever chase me out of these old thickets. If I can't have you—I drift, pronto."

"You—you won't drift," smiled Verna.

They managed to get their heads below the gully's bank long enough for Howdy to kiss her. Then they walked slowly back to camp.

Verna was filling a plate with food, and pouring a cup of coffee for her man, when Howdy said, "Mr. Stone, I aim to shoot square. I want to marry yo' daughter, but I don't blame you if you don't want her to marry a drifter that can't make her a living. I'm not that. My name is not Howdy Grimes, but Joe Brady, and I look so much like my father, the Joe Brady they murdered, that it scared Tate and Wiley to death when they saw me.

"I was born at the old Box B ranch-house, which stood in that grove of live-oaks at the north end of the lake, until Tate Homan burnt it. My mother took me away from here when I was twelve, after my father died, but not until I knew all these thickets. I rode them with old Tiofolo. He has lived in this glade ever since, and he kept me informed.

"I meant to stay here a while, then leave. Now, I don't mean to leave. I own forty thousand acres of land and that water-hole. I think I can feed Verna. All we need now is for you to say the word, and we'll head for Ganado and a preacher."

"I'll gladly say the word," laughed Cal Stone. "I owe you a lot, and I'm giving you the most valuable thing on earth to me."

"Yippee!" yelled Howdy. "Grab yo' bonnet, Verna, and let's ride from here."

"Well, I'll be damned!" chuckled Squint, his blue eyes twinkling. "Howdy Grimes did reform, after all."

The pudgy little peddler had to sell his cigars, or he'd lose his job, the girl he loved, and his last shred of self respect. But he couldn't even give them away at Missouri Bend, until he learned to take a bullet-backed Western jake—and laugh it off in six-shooter smoke!



"I'm no thief," Jake retorted. "And I'm going out of here now."

OMAHA JAKE TASTES

By W. F. Bragg

GUNSMOKE

OMAHA JAKE'S heart felt as heavy as the sample case he took from his buckboard in Missouri Bend's dusty main street. In a half dozen similar sagebrush ports of call scattered along a hundred-mile trail, he hadn't made a single sale. They'd laughed at him, back at the home office of the Big Five Perfecto

Company, when he requested that they put him out on the road as a drummer. They'd told him to step back into the cigar rolling room where he belonged, since he did at least know something about tobacco.

But there was a girl who had faith in the pudgy, bullet-headed little man. And she'd

told him that he must get out among men as a salesman, build up his courage in meeting the world, if he hoped to succeed and accumulate enough money to buy her a diamond ring.

Missouri Bend stood right in the middle of the toughest territory on the Big Perfecto's chart. Omaha Jake took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

The Blue Goose Bar appeared a likely starting point. He hustled through the batwing doors, pretending a hail-fellow front that he certainly didn't feel in his heart. Jake knew the firm had sent him out here to show him the folly of quitting his familiar cigar maker's bench for the rough, tough life of a frontier drummer.

They expected him to quit, turn in his sample case.

But he knew, as he looked across the wet mahogany at hatchet-faced One Thumb Dodge, boss of the Blue Goose, that if he crept back to the office with his tail between his short legs, there'd be no buying of diamond rings for the girl who had faith in him.

"Have a smoke," he said genially to One Thumb, rolling a cigar across the bar.

One Thumb ran a suspicious eye over the runty stranger, who wore a brown derby hat cocked on the side of his round head, and a dusty checked plaid suit beneath a flapping duster.

"You sellin' 'em?" he asked.

"Sure thing. Best five cent smoke west of the Missouri. Clear Havana filler."

This was the slack season in Missouri Bend, between the calf and beef roundups, and One Thumb Dodge's booted and spurred customers lacked entertainment. This salesman might add a little zest to Blue Goose business. One Thumb passed a wink to the thirsty line in front of the bar, and across the room to the freeze-out players. He wasn't a cruel man, nor were his guests. But little Jake, in his derby and plaid suit, seemed fair prey for mer-

riment on a dull Missouri Bend night.

Of course they couldn't know of the sore heart beneath the plaid jacket. Nor the desperation in the brain beneath the derby. Nor the burning desire possessed by Omaha Jake to make good as a salesman because he loved a lady.

One Thumb Dodge frowned and sniffed suspiciously at the cigar. "You've hit the wrong deadfall, stranger," he growled. "This here's two fer' territory."

"Two fer'?"

"Sure, two fer a quarter. Gents in Missouri Bend, when they buy seegars, do it to celebrate weddin's or new babies in the family. They'd figure themselves pikers to pass out nickel smokes. And so would the man they offered one to." Dodge returned the cigar to Jake. "They never go for seegars that sell fer less than two fer."

With a sigh, Jake took an unopened cigar box from his case. "Special premium to good customers," he said. "A box of two fers. Take it with the firm's compliments."

Dodge grinned and nodded his thanks as he placed the box in his safe.

"You talk like a sport," he said cheerfully. "Pitch in an' have a good time this evenin'. I'll look over your line in the mornin'. Theres a freeze-out game over there. We'll cut in." But as they moved across the room, Dodge warned, "Don't pass out none of your nickel cabbagios. Some of these touchy gents might deem it an insult."

Cheered because at last a prospective customer had agreed to look over his wares, Jake pulled out a chair, bought chips, and was dealt a hand.

Across the table sat a morose gentleman with a black mustache, and a soul apparently embittered at the world because the cards weren't running his way. He was called Badger-face Smith.

On the fourth deal he threw down his hand and snarled, "I ain't drawn any-

thing good for an hour. I expect *some* bad luck. But these cyards are jest *too* damned unlucky."

One Thumb Dodge dropped his right hand below table level as he stated coldly, "These are house cyards. They was dished out in a sealed deck when this game started. Just what was you intimatin', Mister Smith?"

Several weeks in the West had taught Omaha Jake a few pointers. He saw blood on the moon—and soon. Men out here went to the smoke over crooked card games. He didn't know whether One Thumb Dodge was much of a gunman. But if Badger-face was more expert, then Jake would lose all chance of making his sale in the morning. Here then was the time for a salesman to intervene, purely as a matter of policy.

Though Jake's voice sounded husky, he rolled a smoke across the green baize to Badger-face Smith. And he said jovially, "Forget it. Have a cigar on me, friend."

Badger-face picked up the cigar, sniffed it. Then, casting it into Jake's face, he whipped a gun from under his coat and lined the barrel on the startled drummer.

"Add insult to injury!" Badger-face roared. "Crooked cyards, first! Then, *five cent seegars!*"

The big Colt exploded. Jake felt his derby rise and settle on his head. He saw One Thumb Dodge unhook his iron and come thundering into action. Men were flopping to the floor, diving behind the base-burner stove at the rear of the bar. The table barred Jake's path toward the front entrance. But he placed his right hand on the top and soared over, grandly as a sage hen taking flight. He went out into the Wyoming night just ahead of a second bullet that cut splinters off the door casing.

Swiftly as he fled, though, his salesman's instinct bade him grab his sample case off the bar as he raced past.

ECHOES of gunfire, rolling down the street, followed Jake as he dashed into the Mountain Rest Hotel. Old Pete Swing, night clerk, awoke from his doze behind the desk. He reached automatically for a sawed-off shotgun, threw down on the bewildered little salesman, who'd registered here a couple of hours before.

"What's up?" barked Swing. "Hold-up?"

Jake swayed as he clung to the desk. "After me," he panted. "Fellow named Badger-face Smith."

"Bad man," snapped Pete Swing. "Bad with a gun. You're a guest of the house. Have a shotgun. Give him both barrels as he comes through the door."

"Don't know anything about guns. All I know's *tobacco*. That's how I got in bad with Smith and the rest. Tryin' to hand out nickel cigars." Jake gasped out the account of how his earnest efforts to clinch a sale had brought on the shooting scrape. Pete Swing listened with a granite face.

When Jake had concluded, Pete started to put the shotgun back in the corner. "I'll keep an eye out for Badger-face," he consoled. "This here Greener's loaded with buckshot. Go on upstairs. Lock your door. Barricade yourself in with your bed and bureau."

"Thanks," Jake whispered as he picked up his case and turned from the desk. "Have a cigar!" And he rolled a smoke across the register.

Pete, still balancing the shotgun, picked up the smoke, sniffed it, inquired coldly, "Is this here one of them nickel seegars?"

"Big Five Perfecto. Best smoke west of the Missouri—"

Pete flung the shotgun forward, roared, "Git for your room before I start shoot-in'! A nickel seegar in a two fer country—"

Jake went up the stairs three at a time. He hurtled into his room, shoved bed

and bureau against the locked door. Then he sank down in the single chair, lit the coal oil lamp, wiped the sweat off his round face. He could hear the wind whining around the eaves, the occasional blatting of guns outside, the whoops of horsemen pounding up and down the street. Apparently he'd stirred up Missouri Bend. He'd never believed men could be so touchy about tobacco.

The chances of putting a ring on a girl's finger seemed very remote. The Big Five firm had told the truth. He wasn't tough enough to cope with the Western world. He'd better go back to his cigar maker's bench and throw away his sample case and his brown derby. The derby with a bullet hole through it. A hole that made Jake shudder as he poked a finger through. Three inches lower and he'd have gone home in a box.

Better perhaps that he should. For why should a man live on when he'd not measured up to the faith of the girl he loved?

"She can't blame me," Jake said desperately. "I don't know anything about guns. All I know is tobacco."

Gunfire drew nearer. Jake dared not remove his clothing. Even Pete Swing had threatened him. Toward midnight he heard a cautious rap on the door.

"Go away," he pleaded. "I'm hitchin' up and gettin' out of town at daylight."

"Better go now," Pete Swing told him. "You shore touched off Badger-face Smith. He's combin' the town for you. I told him you'd hid out. Though I sorta hated to do it for a nickel-nursin' gent like you. But, after all, you're a guest of the house."

"But how can I get out? I show up on the street an' Smith may plug me."

"The Mountain Rest provides conveniences for its guests. I slipped around and put a ladder up to your window. Slide down. Hit across back lots to the stable. Hook up your team and ramble."

Jake pondered. Then he said, "But you got my sample case. When you hoisted that shotgun, I forgot to grab it off your desk. I'm a salesman. I need that case. Fetch it up to me."

"Go for it yourself if you got the nerve. Anyway, you ain't no salesman while you're peddlin' nickel seegars in two fer territory."

The sudden roar of a gun in the lobby shook the walls of Jake's room.

"It's Smith!" cried Pete Swing. "He's broke in while I was up here trying to help you. He's comin' up the stairs! Hit that ladder! Slide for your life!"

Jake jammed the derby down on his head. He hadn't removed anything else. He went through the window, slid down the ladder. And with a mighty splash he landed in the hotel's big rain barrel. The lower ends of the ladder had been thrust into it.

Jake crawled forth, trailing water like a fat beaver. As he did so, he heard a burst of roaring laughter from the dark shadows. Then he knew that he'd been the butt of a crude frontier joke. They'd shown him up as a coward and now they were laughing him out of town.

Jake slunk across lots to the livery barn, where he'd stabled his team. The wind cut through his soaked clothing. He didn't care about that. For the chill of his shivering body was far less than the cold numbness that gripped his heart.

It had been a great joke—to One Thumb Dodge, Badger-face Smith, and Pete Swing, and all the other men of Missouri Bend. But it was tragedy to Omaha Jake. He knew now that he'd have to flee from this town. He could never face laughter. And so the girl would know that her faith had been misplaced.

He couldn't be blamed. He had told the truth. He didn't understand guns, nor the men behind them. But he knew tobacco. He'd go to the lonely bench, and

try to forget his dreams of diamonds for fair women.

His hands were so chilled he found he couldn't buckle on the harness nor hook the tugs to the double trees. He crawled into the hay mow to warm up. He had suffered a shock that had exhausted him. He fell instantly into a deep sleep. He aroused toward dawn, feeling the barn shake to the rumble of a distant explosion.

He sat there in the gray gloom, thinking. They'd had their laugh. Why couldn't they get to their beds and forget the runty little salesman who'd brightened their dull evening? Why keep it up, this shooting and horse-play, this seeking of Omaha Jake for more comedy?

They'd as much as stolen his salesman's case. It was back in the hotel. Pete had told him to get it if he had the nerve. Until this dawn, that sample case had been to Omaha Jake a symbol of manhood, something he carried proudly to show the western world he was a man big enough to sell cigars in a rough, tough territory. He'd lost not only his reputation in Missouri Bend and his chance of winning a bride, but also his case—his badge of honor.

He'd sunk pretty low as a salesman. But he vowed that he wouldn't sink so low as to flee from Missouri Bend without his sample case. Through the shadows, he crept back to the Mountain Rest. His restless eyes scanned every patch of shadow. He expected at any moment to see a roaring crowd of laughing gunmen bear down on him.

It wasn't until he reached the hotel doorway that they saw him. One Thumb Dodge rounded the corner. He pitched up a gun and shouted, "Stop, thief!"

△ △ △

JAKE dived into the lobby ahead of a bullet that came too near his head for any jest.

And Dodge had called him a thief. Well, he hadn't shown much indication of being a man. But he'd lived an honest life, at least. Anger began to simmer in him.

He heard the scrape of boots on the hotel porch. Men were shouting outside, echoing Dodge's taunt that Omaha Jake was a thief.

At bay, Omaha Jake circled the hotel desk. He knew nothing about guns. But the shotgun still stood in the corner.

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Also, he noticed that his sample case hung from a hook in the wall.

As Dodge led a dozen Missouri Benders into the lobby, Omaha Jake grabbed the shotgun, cocked both hammers, and lined his weapon.

He didn't know it, but the bravest gunman respects a sawed-off scattergun at close range. Dodge checked abruptly, as did his mates. In the crowd stood Badger-face Smith. And from the kitchen came old Pete Swing, his hands sooty from building the breakfast fire.

"Boys," Jake yelled, "you've had your fun. I'll get out of town right away. But I had to come back for my sample case. I'm a salesman and I need it. Now—" he tilted the shotgun suggestively—"I don't know much about guns. But I go out of here with my case, even if I have to shoot my way out."

"Fun?" roared One Thumb Dodge. "We ain't funnin'. You couldn't take a joke. You sneaked back after the town had bedded down. You blew the door off my safe and cleaned out my bankroll, everything in the damned box. I'll bet you got dynamite in that case right now 'stead of cheap seegars."

"My tobacco may be cheap," Jake retorted, "but it's good smoking. And I'm no thief. I'm going out of here *now*."

Badger-face Smith, shouldering to the front, flung a frayed cigar in front of Jake.

"Have a smoke," he taunted. "That five cent cigar you gave me last night. Cheap as you are. If you wasn't holding that gun, I'd shore smoke you out."

Jake's nose twitched. Then he yelled, "This here's a *two fer*, Smith. Like them in the box I gave to Dodge."

"You lie!" roared Smith.

"Cigars are a joke to you, Smith. But not to me. I know cigars."

"And I know guns. I'd show you, if your shotgun wasn't loaded."

Pete Swing spoke so softly that only Badger-face Smith and Dodge heard him: "That shotgun ain't loaded."

Smith grinned triumphantly, unhooked his gun, lurched toward Jake. "You don't dare go to the *real* smoke," he taunted.

Jake's heart turned over. Smith's gun looked as large as a cannon. But the scrubby little salesman thought once of the girl in Omaha. Then he closed both his eyes, pulled the triggers of the shotgun—and was punched back against the wall as the barrels belched buckshot.

When they picked him up, he was still clinging to the gun.

They found the buckshot riddled bankroll and a handful of tattered cigars in Badger-face Smith's pocket before they carted the gunman's groaning remains off to the town jug.

"Can't fool me on tobacco," Jake said.

One Thumb Dodge waited on Jake, later, with a Missouri Bend committee. "Jake," he said, "this town goes whole hawg hereafter for Big Five Perfectos. Write me up for a carload!"

Then Dodge turned reproachfully upon old Pete Swing. "But you shoulda let us gents take care of Smith, after Jake had exposed him. You knew damned well that shotgun was loaded."

Pete grinned. "That never worried me. Smith knew his guns so well he wouldn't go against what he figured was a loaded scattergun. Jake knew his tobacco. Me, I knew my man. When that little feller came back for his sample case, darin' a hostile town to stop him, I knew he was a *man*."

"Thanks," whispered Jake. "Have a cigar."

"Five center?"

"Naw. Two fer. I'm celebratin' a weddin'."

"Whose?"

"Mine. Soon as I can get back to Omaha with this carload order."



Western Brain-Twisters

By Nevada Dick

Pit your wits in a quiz of Western frontier history, against an old-timer who knows the thrilling saga of the cattle country!

1. To what did the early pioneer refer when speaking of the "shoes of silence?"
2. The Petrified Forest lies in what state?
3. Were the Black Hills of the Dakotas so named because of the color of the earth?
4. Most of the cattle shipped East during the early days of the West came from what state?
5. Define a "bog rider" and his duties.
6. Can you name the Irishman who, in the late 70's, became the partner of Charles Goodnight, pioneer cattleman of the Texas Panhandle.
7. In the place of a shirt, many of the frontier townsmen wore a false front, made of white linen, with a band to attach a collar. This was worn under a vest, giving the appearance of a white shirt. By what name was this known?
8. On the bottom of a horse's foot is a V-shaped piece of cartilage called the "frog." How does this "frog" function?
9. Was Billy the Kid right or left-handed?
10. Who discovered the famous Carlsbad Caverns of New Mexico?
11. Placerville, California, was known by what name during the gold rush days of 1849?
12. In length, how do the ropes used by the American cowboy and the Mexican vaquero compare? Of what are they made?
13. Was there ever a trail known as the "McCoy Trail?"
14. During buffalo hunting days what was the duty of the man called the "dropper?"
15. A coyote sometimes will attack man, stock or a dog. What is the reason for this in view of the fact that the coyote is known as a cowardly animal?

(For correct answers, turn to page 102)



A novelette of longhorn
trail-blazers

SATAN'S TRAIL DRIVE

By Rod Patterson

CHAPTER ONE

Make Way for the Longhorns!

THE fretful bawling of the steers and the clashing of horns mingled in a weird crescendo as the Diamond-Dot trail herd milled on the sagebrush flats south of the Beargrass Hills.

The heavy, opaque air seemed to blur and deaden the sounds into the confused unreality of a nightmare. Lass ropes cracked in the windy distance, trail hands occasionally shouted their shrill whoops, hoofs drummed the hard-packed earth of the holding spot.

In the midst of that smoky, turbulent bedlam stood Glenn Foraker, his red



Pete Lassiter reached the prostrate form of the Kid first and caught it under the shoulders.

Young Glenn Foraker swore he'd beat that great Sphinx herd to market and smash forever a gunman-ruled domain. . . even if it meant a trailside graveyard payoff with his own father, the range tyrant who had damned and exiled him as nester-loving scum!

neckpiece trapped high under cobalt eyes that were slitted against the flash of the Texas spring sun.

The tall, rawboned young cowman, his lean face burned almost black by wind and sun, was watching the two men who had just tipped their ponies down the slope of a hogback to the west of the held herd. And then he stiffened as he recognized the

bulky form of his father, Orin B. Foraker—and riding briskly at his side, the old man's burly trail boss, Creed Moseby.

The two Sphinx men came on, opening their horses up into a high lope as they hit the foot of the grade. A moment later, they reined in opposite Glenn at the rim of the bowl. Orin Foraker held his roan with one thick hand while he lifted his

right leg, encased in saddle-whitened levis, and draped it deliberately over the saddle horn. Shaded by the limp brim of a big Stetson, eyes that were cold and agate-hard traveled slowly over the herd, then settled on Glenn's expressionless face.

"Glenn"—he spoke in a voice completely without emotion—"I jest heard you're gonna give me a fight for first crack at the Government Trail tomorrow."

For a long moment, Glenn didn't speak. "That's right, O. B.," he finally said, raising his voice above the racket of the herd. "What about it?"

Orin Foraker ejected a stream of tobacco juice, watched the little snake's-head of dust rise and float away. "You ain't big enough around the belt to bluff me, Glenn," he said.

"I ain't bluffin', O. B." Glenn was unruffled. "Since when is it a law that Sphinx is the only outfit can bid on Injun Agency beef?"

The old man answered in the curt tone he used for icing down heating tempers. "Cap'n Harmon sent me word that he's only contractin' for a thousand head at the old price this year. That means the man who gits across the Niobrara fust, wins out."

Glenn raised a brown hand and jerked down his bandanna, revealing a mouth that was as tight and hard as his father's. "All right," he said. "So what?"

"I been makin' this drive to Ogalalla Agency for the past ten years," the old man went on deliberately. "I've paid with blood and sweat to put Sphinx where it is today." He leaned forward, a sudden hard flatness in his voice. "And I don't aim to allow no blasted nester-helper to beat me out now—son or no son!"

A hard laugh jerked suddenly from Creed Moseby, who had been silently watching Glenn until now. "Foraker," he said, "I figured you had more brains than to try to shove this bunch of busted-down cripples to the Gap ahead of Sphinx!"

The foreman was about forty, nearly as heavy as his boss, though not so tall. There was the track of an old scar on his right cheekbone, imparting a rather sinister aspect to that side of his face. He eyed Glenn truculently. "Better think it over good," he finished.

Glenn ignored the foreman. He looked at his father. "Times have changed, O. B.," he said quietly, "and you're too bull-headed to realize it."

A dull flush stained Orin Foraker's set face, but it was Moseby who answered. "Times sure *have* changed," he agreed. "Leastways, since you went on your own. Two years ago we didn't have to fight the damned hoemen at every corner; we didn't have turn-coats like you, then. We had this whole country to range in. And we didn't have to use no Gov'ment Trail to git our stuff to the Agency."

"Conditions have changed," Orin Foraker put in, "not times. But there's one thing that ain't changed—and that's men!"

"Any hombre," Moseby said flatly, "that puts up a fight for a squatter's rights in cow country ain't a man! He's a low-down saddle skunk!"

Glenn's mouth tightened. He was recalling that Moseby had had a hand in the eviction of John Tatum and his daughter, Sheila, the year before. And that recollection, and the knowledge that the foreman was still trying to force his attentions on the girl by riding frequently to the Gap, sent a sudden stab of anger through him. He speared Moseby with a glance.

"If you two are finished with your blasted wind-jammin', you better get goin'! I aim to punch the breeze in an hour."

Creed Moseby laughed. "Start's the only thing you'll do, Foraker! Sphinx is ten miles closer to Humbolt Gap than you are. You'd have to run these moth-eaten critters of yours clear up and around Black Jack Mountain to get the bulge on

us. 'Course yuh could shag 'em down to the Comanche and get through by trompin' hell outa Abe Yager's crops, but it ain't likely he'd even let you do that."

He laughed again, hugely pleased with himself. "By God, but there's a rich one for yuh! Yuh fought your old man from hell to breakfast over lettin' Abe Yager in, and now you're gonna get paid off for it!"

"All right!" Orin Foraker snapped. The old man's face was as hard and masked as a Navajo's as he picked up his reins and rammed his right boot back in the stirrup. "I'm givin' yuh fair warnin', Glenn! Sphinx'll run the hide an' taller off every cow yuh own if yuh git in our way! We'll run these damn' decayed brush-splitters o' yours till they'll be a-crawlin' and a-stumpin' along with their legs worn down to their blasted knees! Yuh'll see."

Glenn still spoke quietly, controlling himself with an effort. "You won't get a chance, O. B. Because I'm plannin' to be at Humbolt Gap ahead of you."

"The hell yuh will!" Foraker barked. "I'll be there by noon tomorrow, when the Trail opens! And I'll hog it the hull sixty mile to the Niobrara—leave it as bare as the hot-bed o' hell!"

"Try it," Glenn said.

The old man cried, "Come on, Moseby!" and turned his horse with a savage jerk of the reins.

GLENN watched them ride swiftly back along the edge of the herd.

He had known from the start that this clash with Sphinx would be inevitable. Ever since his mother's death, five years ago, he had drifted further and further away from an understanding with his father, until a little over a year ago, a definite break had occurred.

There was a picture in Glenn's mind; a picture that nothing could ever erase: Orin Foraker, standing wide-legged in the saddle room at Sphinx Ranch—words exploding from his lips like pistol shots.

"So yuh thought yuh could run a sandy on me and git away with it, huh? Lettin' that damn' fool hoeman, John Tatum, and his angel-faced daughter squat on our East Forty! Well, by thunder, they ain't up there now! I've seen to it they been choused clean outa the valley! What d'yuh think of that?"

And Glenn's voice stabbing the silence: "A man that burns the roof over people's heads is nothin' but a damn sneakin' coyote!" Then, with deadly calm: "The Land Commissioner at Mariposa granted Sheila and her dad a quarter-section at Humbolt Gap. Just try and drive 'em outa there!"

"Yuh mean to tell me yuh went over my head to the Land Office for that damned churn-twister?"

"Damn' right! And I'm ra'r'in' right up on my hind legs to state that here's one hombre that's gonna buck you clean



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to hell and back if you set your gun-dogs on the Tatums again!"

"Git off my land!" The old man was shaking with fury. "Git out, yuh damn' squatter-lover! Git out!"

Well, he'd left Sphinx—saddle, war-sack, everything. It was like turning your back on all the things you had loved, everything you had thought worth while in life. And you were bitter—and a little regretful. But after a while you thought of Sheila Tatum and what it meant to her and her father to have a real home, and you were glad you'd fought for them. At first you hadn't even minded it so much when Sheila told you that Creed Moseby was bothering her again, because Sheila, always so capable and self-assured, seemed well able to put the foreman in his place. But you soon realized that your dislike for Moseby was turning into a definite hate.

And jobs were scarce on Yakapai range. Orin Foraker controlled the valley from Humbolt Gap to the rim of the desert and the state line, and ruled the country with an iron hand. Well, you'd pitched a camp in the Beargrass Hills for a month, and, finally, when a doubtful opportunity to get in the cattle business presented itself, you were in a mood to listen. And so you gambled all of your meager savings in a shaky venture and bought Diamond-Dot, a run-down spread at the edge of the valley, and you were bucking Orin B. Foraker, the cattle king of Yakapai!

This Government Cattle Trail was something new. The influx of settlers to the Territory and the expansion of the farms in the Washita Basin had compelled the authorities to crack down hard on the cattle barons to the south, who every spring drifted their herds to the Niobrara and the Missouri and the Platte.

Two years ago, the Government had stepped in and established a Land Claim Office at Mariposa to protect the homesteaders. And a narrow strip was staked

out, running from Yakapai to the Clear Fork of the Niobrara, which the cattlemen could use in taking their beef to the market. In that sixty-mile-long channel cattle had to be bunched tightly, or spill over into the great fields of rye and wheat and alfalfa.

Settlers along this trail, in self-defense, had thrown up their defending barriers of barbed wire, and during the drives had even posted armed pickets along the Trail to guard their rights. And so, from the town of Mariposa to the Washita plains, the cattle could not swing in any direction, as in the old days; they had to be held in whether the *charcos*, or natural water holes, were low or not. That was why the first trail herd to reach Humbolt Gap was assured of controlling the graze and water, and eventually the highest price at the Agency. It was a case of first come, first served.

Glenn walked over to his moro pony, Blue, ground-haltered in a willow thicket at the rim of the bowl. He stepped up to the saddle and rode briskly around the edge of the herd to his trail camp under the ridge.

Chip Lonigan, his red-headed foreman, was squatted down in the thin shade of a high-stalked pitahaya. Lonigan was a top hand, but it was hard for him to hold on to a job because of his fondness for what he called "cookin' whisky." Glenn, however, could not afford to be particular and so had kept the easy-going cowpoke in spite of his frequent defections from duty.

"*Vámonos!*" Glenn said, swinging down from Blue. "Trail opens tomorrow morning. We're pullin' our freight pronto, Chip!"

The foreman's lusterless gray eyes and round, stubble-bearded face took on a spark of animation. "*Bueno!*" he said, starting to gather up his bedroll and gear. "Pete an' Ben've been pesterin' me all mornin'. And the Kid's as jumpy as a cat in a barrel with the head on."

The Kid was a sixteen-year-old Glenn had taken in the year before when his father, a nester, had been killed in a fence fight.

"Tell 'em to start headin' up the point," Glenn said. "We're shovin' for the Comanche."

Lonigan looked up quickly. "Ain't we gonna go around Black Jack?"

"Hell, no! We'll head straight down the river and swing over Abe Yager's north line, then over to Dill's Crossin'."

"But we can't do that," Lonigan protested. "Yager'd cut loose with his blue lightnin' if we try that, Glenn. Why, he's jest finished seedin' that north piece to corn. The herd'd tromp it to hell-an'-gone!"

"I aim to talk to Abe first."

"Judas!" crowed Lonigan. "That'd put us on the Trail three-four hours ahead o' Sphinx! Mebbe we won't learn the old man and that smart-alec foreman o' his a thing or two!"

"Maybe—if they don't smell skunk," Glenn said cautiously. "I'm a gone coon, Chip, if they do."

CHAPTER TWO

Never Mind the Guns!

THE sun wheeled high in a topaz sky when Glenn pulled tight the last diamond hitch on his trail packs. Lonigan and the three hands had already begun to haze the herd toward a break in the hills when he stepped up on Blue and jerked the lead rope of his three pack horses.

He rode out on the flats as the herd, moving ponderously, headed west. He pulled his neckpiece above his nose to cut the trail dust, and settled down to the afternoon's long grind. Slack in the saddle, he watched the day march on, now and then leaving his position to round up straying beef, now and then pausing to

roll up a smoke. At three o'clock Glenn went up to point, and Lonigan, with the pack train, dropped back to take the drag. Pete Lassiter and Ben Ott rode flank, while the Kid, sober-faced but excited, stayed with Glenn.

It was the boy's first drive and Glenn, who had grown attached to him, decided he'd do as a cowhand, after he was toughened up a little. The Kid rode stiffly at Glenn's side, keeping a wary eye on the lead steers crowding close at his tail.

"Never mind them old mossy-horns, son," Glenn grinned. "They smell water—don't even savvy we're alive."

"Aw, I don't mind 'em, Glenn"—the Kid flashed him a sheepish smile—"but I was jest wonderin' what'd happen if that old blaze-faced one butted my horse with them horns."

Glenn laughed. "You'd sure be busted plumb into the middle of some trouble, son. But don't worry; that old horse of yours has got his eye peeled."

An hour later they turned the herd along a rocky ridge which they followed until it broke into the well-grassed draws of the river. There Glenn let the herd fill up and, leaving Lonigan to watch the pack string, rode rapidly in the direction of Abe Yager's shake-roofed house, just visible in a grove of Chino trees about a mile away. A moment later, he stopped Blue in the dusty yard and hailed the house.

A tall, lean-faced man in straw sombrero and faded dungarees came out at once. He had a .30-gun cradled in the crook of one bony arm and an expression that was distinctly unfriendly.

Glenn said, "Howdy, Abe," and waited for the nester to come up. Yager stopped a pace away, peering near-sightedly into the young cowman's face.

"Oh," he finally said. "Didn't recognize yuh, Glenn. How are yuh?"

Glenn wasted no time. "I wanta ask a favor, Abe," he said. "Wondered if

you'd mind if I shove my beef through that plowed piece back there? It's the quickest way to the Crossin', and the only way I can get the drop on O. B. Foraker at the Gap."

Abe pushed back his hat and scratched an ear thoughtfully. "Hell!" he said. "I jest put ten dollars wuth o' seed in that piece, Glenn. But—"

"I'll pay for the seed," Glenn cut in quickly. "And I'll ride over and help you plant it, too—soon as I get back from the Agency."

"Hell," Abe Yager grinned, "I ain't never forgot how yuh kep' Sphinx from burnin' me out that time! No call for a regular like you anti-godlin' all over the country. Take yore herd through, an' to hell with the seed!"

Glenn thanked the homesteader and rode back to the herd. An hour later they were pushing along the sandy bank of the Comanche toward Dill's Crossing, five miles up-stream. All this was done without talking or yelling, for Lonigan was suddenly tight-lipped and taciturn, and Glenn had his mind full of the coming struggle.

Heat crowded around the herd and the alkali soil glittered between its patches of rock and dry bunch grass. Off to the left, the river twisted in and out of low hills like some drab, discarded ribbon. Ahead, in an empty land, the packed cattle trail ran up and down across monotonous, bleached-white undulations.

At Dill's Crossing, the herd pushed through the tules and plunged into the shallow stream. The afternoon's quiet was stirred by the hoarse bellowing of the steers and the wash of hoof-sundered waters as they drank and moved on. Glenn and the crew bunched the cattle on the west bank and made camp. Afraid wood smoke might tip their hand to Sphinx before they were ready, they ate a cold supper of canned tomatoes and beans.

Just at dusk the long column of Sphinx

beef broke through the purple shadows three miles down-stream, whereupon Glenn ordered Pete Lassiter and Ben Ott back to the herd to relieve the Kid. Chip Lonigan went over and pulled his Winchester from the boot of his saddle and squatted down by his gear.

Ten minutes passed, and then the Kid rode in and ground-hitched his horse. He reported, "Sphinx jest made camp," and rolled up in his tarp.

"Well," Glenn said quietly, "they know by now we got the bulge on 'em. And by tomorrow morning this valley'll be as peaceful as hell emigratin' on cartwheels."

"Let 'em start somethin'," growled Lonigan, working the bolt of his rifle savagely. He had been kicked off Sphinx four years before by Creed Moseby.

"No gunplay, Chip," Glenn cautioned. "Not unless they start it."

Suddenly the stars were shining out of a jet-black sky. Glenn got up and mounted Blue and rode out to the bedded herd. He sent Pete and Ben back to sleep and then, singing gently to the cattle, rode his slow continuous circle.

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AT MIDNIGHT, when he returned to the fire, he found Chip Lonigan still hunkered before it, cross-legged, a hard pressure ridging his mouth. Glenn knew the signs and felt a sudden qualm. Lonigan was ripe for another drunk. But, Glenn reasoned, they were too far from the nearest town, Mariposa; but tomorrow the foreman would bear close watching. If Lonigan failed him now, his whole effort would be jeopardized. He was short-handed as it was, against an outfit of at least a dozen riders, rodded by a ruthless old man and a treacherous trail boss.

Glenn said, "Night-owlin' again?"

Lonigan grunted. "Can't sleep," he murmured, and rose to walk stiffly toward

his tethered bay in the shadows. Glenn was wrapped in his soogans when the foreman came back, mounted on the bay.

Lonigan said, "I'll call yuh in three hours," and rode off toward the herd.

Looking up at the cloudy glitter of the stars, Glenn thought of Sheila Tatum. Twice a month, since he had helped the girl and her father to get established on their little farm at Humbolt Gap, he had taken the trouble to ride that thirty miles to see her. All through the past year he had argued with himself that it was only his love of fair play that made him interested in their welfare. Now, suddenly, he knew that was a lie. It was the dark-eyed, friendly girl who had aroused him. Thinking of her, he fell into a healthy man's instant sleep.

He awoke with a start to find himself standing upright in the dark, his sixgun lifted against the night. A quick burst of gunfire rolled across the stillness; the ground began to drum hard under flying hoofs. Racing to his saddled horse, he yelled: "Pete . . . Ben!" and caught their answering halloo in the shadows behind him.

Glenn hit the saddle running, rammed Blue straight toward the herd. Through a fresh volley of firing he heard high voices calling, saw the long shadows that were mounted men streaking along the earth. All the racket had spooked the herd and the steers were on the verge of running. Pale shafts of light stabbed the night, flashing and fading and flashing again, and these, Glenn knew, were Sphinx guns laying panic on the herd.

And then Pete and Ben and the Kid were riding up and Glenn yelled, "Stay back, Kid! We'll handle this!" But the boy paid no heed to the warning. He kept on, spurring his horse into the melee. They swung away together and rushed on, cutting around the edges of the herd.

Lead screamed around them, and the attacking Sphinx crew wheeled in the

foreground and began to turn the far edge of the beef, pressing it toward Glenn and his men.

Glenn yelled, "Lonigan! Lonigan!" and rushed on. Grim rage swept him, for he knew that if Moseby succeeded in stampeding the herd, it would be finished—it would take a day to round the frightened, half-wild steers out of the brasada.

Glenn laid a sight on a vague shape squarely in front of him and let go with a shot. At the same instant, the Kid, on his right, began firing. The dim shadows of other riders wheeled and came around the side of the herd. Steers pitched past Glenn and the Kid, and the horses bucked against the pressure of their close-packed bodies.

Suddenly a rider burst out of the murk and Glenn recognized the tall figure of Creed Moseby. Instantaneously Moseby fired—point-blank. Glenn heard the Kid's quick cry and, knowing the boy was hit, plunged hard at the Sphinx foreman. But Moseby flashed by and raced away into the night. And all of the other riders whirled and lunged away and a man's high voice let out a long, shrill whoop.

Pete Lassiter rode up, saying: "Who's that on the ground?" The rumble of Sphinx horses diminished and Glenn stepped down from the saddle, knowing that the night's fight was done. And he knew something else: It was Moseby's crew that had given way, not Moseby.

Pete Lassiter reached the prostrate form of the Kid first, and caught it under the shoulders. "The boy's dead, Glenn," he murmured.

Glenn stood tensely on his feet, sudden emotion choking him. Nothing had been helped by the death of the Kid. Now, even more than before, it had to be settled. Glenn had a bad moment, thinking of it; he had a sudden savage wish that Creed Moseby would return to try again. Afterward he said, "Poor kid—poor kid!"

They buried the boy at the edge of the

river in the darkness and piled a little mound of stones to mark his grave. Later, they worked the herd into a semblance of order. Dawn stained the earth with gray light when at last Glenn returned to the camp. Throughout the night's excitement there had been no sign of Chip Lonigan, and so it was with a surge of anger that Glenn found the red-haired foreman stretched on the ground at the camp, dead to the world, an empty whisky bottle beside him.

Glenn knew this was the work of Sphinx; of Creed Moseby, and possibly of his father. This, then, was the first round in the fight for control of the Government Cattle Trail. And he had lost it. His mind was weighted with worry as he packed the camp gear and lashed it to the three pack animals. Then he carried a hat full of icy water from the river and flung it savagely into the face of the sleeping foreman.

Lonigan sat up, spluttering and groggy. "It was Moseby gimme the bottle, boss," he answered Glenn's clipped questioning. "I tried not to take that fust drink. Honest to God, I did, Glenn!"

And now Glenn realized that this night's catastrophe brought another problem fully as serious as losing the lead on the trail. His craving for drink aroused, Lonigan might try to steal away to Mariposa and the nearest saloon, leaving Glenn with only two hands to work a herd of a thousand steers not yet trail-broken. And after the attempt by Sphinx to stampede them, they would be apt to spook at the slightest provocation!

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THE sun was a glaring orange disc above the eastern hills when Glenn started the herd north along the river bank that morning. He passed the lead rope of the pack string to his silently suffering foreman and rode back to cover

the drag. There was no sign of Sphinx in the mist to the south, and Glenn realized suddenly that O. B. Foraker must have taken his herd over the western ridge of hills, must now be pushing fast toward Humbolt Gap, traveling almost opposite Diamond-Dot.

Toward mid-morning Glenn was jerked out of his somber thoughts by the noisy arrival of Pete Lassiter from the point. Pete's eyes, red-rimmed with dust, flashed angrily as he reined up, bawling: "Lonigan's lit out! The damn' no-good drunk's gone to town!"

Cursing himself for a careless fool, Glenn ordered Pete back to point and turned Blue, quartering away from the herd in the direction of town. He rode with a welter of emotions—grim pleasure at having blocked his father at least temporarily—a goading fear that he might not be able to head off Lonigan before he could drink himself into helplessness. For without the foreman, it might go badly for Diamond-Dot when the pinch of action summoned—a dozen hard-riding hombres for Sphinx; three for Diamond-Dot. A disproportion that well might spell disaster three hours from now.

Glenn flogged the moro along a trail between close-ranked clumps of sage and Spanish bayonet. At the crest of the axis of hills that separated the two embattled herds, he had his glimpse of Sphinx for the first time since the previous night. Orin Foraker's big herd was pushing up the valley, three or four miles to the southward. A great pillar of yellow dust, like a storm cloud, drifted against the blue spring sky.

A mile from town, Glenn saw a rider coming toward him up the trail; he didn't slacken the speed of Blue, but rushed on until suddenly he recognized the oncoming stranger as Sheila Tatum. When he was close enough to see her face clearly, he realized there was something like terror in her dark eyes. She was signaling fran-

tically for him to stop. He pulled up, feeling his heart skip a beat as the girl came on and reined her pony abreast of him.

Dust yellowed her white shirtwaist, streaked the warm tan of her small oval face. Her voice came to him with a quick, tense swing: "Don't go in there, Glenn! Please!"

Glenn seized the bridle of her roan. "What's wrong?" he said.

"Creed Moseby's in town," she panted. "Four or five of your dad's riders are with him—at the saloon. I saw him—talked to him." She paused for breath, rushed on: "He nearly broke my arm, trying to keep me from riding out! Glenn, there's going to be trouble if you go in there!"

"Is *that* all?" Irritation edged Glenn's voice. He saw at once that Sphinx had laid a trap for him—baited it with Chip Lonigan!

"Isn't that enough?" The girl leaned toward him, placing a hand on his arm. "Don't go, Glenn," she begged. "It's just what your father wants you to do, can't you see—"

"Look, Sheila." An intractable gleam showed suddenly in Glenn's blue eyes. "I think you're plumb right about O. B. wantin' to get me in town. But I can't let him get away with it. I'm done for without that knot-headed foreman of mine! It's a gamble, no matter how you look at it, but without Chip—"

Sheila Tatum didn't answer him for a moment, but held her hand where it was, her slim fingers clinging to the cloth of his shirt-sleeve. And then she let her arm fall away. They looked at each other, silently exchanging something at this mo-

ment. The girl suddenly sensed the futility of trying to restrain him, and she gave him a tight smile.

"All right, Glenn." She pulled her pony to one side to let him pass. "I'll see you later, at the Gap."

She remained a tense shape there on the trail as Glenn turned the moro and lifted it into a stretching run. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Corpse and Cartridge Occasion

WHEN Glenn Foraker came racking off the hills, ten minutes later, Mariposa town, raw and dusty and bare, lay before him in the strong sunlight. A double row of sun-bleached 'dobies flashed past him as he wheeled down the flat main street and reined Blue in front of the Seven-Up Saloon. He was in luck. Chip Lonigan's big bay was still hitched to the tie rail, as were five ponies bearing the small triangular brand of Sphinx.

Glenn stepped down at once and went up the steps to the saloon's double-decked gallery, his sixgun riding his holster jauntily as he walked. Inside he found Lonigan bellied up to the bar, a tall bottle of Valley Tan anchored in one hairy hand, a squat glass in the other. The foreman turned, a guilty grin spreading over his beard-stubbed face.

"You're jest in time to hi'st one with me, boss. And then we'll show these stove-up rannahs the way to the Gap!"

Glenn said, "You're a hell of a tinhorn sport!" and let his gaze swing around the

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room. He saw Curly Connors and Stud Lomax at the far end of the bar, standing shoulder to shoulder. These were Sphinx hands. But there were two other men behind those two, unfamiliar to him. Glenn noted their hard, bleak faces, the tied-down guns. Cat-eyed killers from the brush country, no doubt of that! Gunmen Moseby had recruited from the owlhoot!

And then Glenn spotted Creed Moseby. The Sphinx foreman was lounging at one of the poker tables on the right, a cigarette tucked in his loose mouth, one large hand draped over the table's green baize top, just above the black handle of his gun. He grinned, his eyes dark and mocking.

"Have a drink, Foraker," he invited with an expansive gesture to the white-faced bartender.

The barkeep changed his mind about sinking down behind the counter and set up another bottle and a glass. Glenn waved it aside, still staring coldly at Moseby. The silence was complete, and no one stepping into the room at this moment could possibly have mistaken its meaning. Creed Moseby's expression turned suddenly surly, and Glenn watched his eyes contract, as a cat's close to vertical slits in a strong light.

Moseby said, "Take a good look 'fore yuh decide to start anything," and stood up abruptly, kicking his chair behind him.

Glenn remained a stiff shape there in the middle of the room. And then he said, "You always did like a crowd behind you," in a voice that flattened into deliberate calm. "Go on and make your play!"

Moseby reddened. He was a man without any quickness of tongue, and it infuriated him to meet a man who had it. Glenn's cool answer and the command that came lashing after it, affected him visibly, but he brushed it aside with a quick down-flick of his fist.

"I got orders," he said sullenly. "I got orders to hold you and Lonigan here till

one o'clock. Which same I'm aimin' to do."

At that moment Chip Lonigan reeled away from the bar and took a stand beside Glenn. He was not as drunk as he seemed, Glenn realized with a good deal of relief. But the rash and crazy temper that had ridden him since the previous night still held.

"Hell," he babbled, "these boys are a little tough, Glenn!" And then he upended his bottle and sloshed the fiery liquor down his throat.

"Shut up!" Glenn snapped. "You're drunk!"

"An' ra'r'in' to go!" cried the foreman, taking another long pull at the bottle.

Without taking his gaze from Moseby, Glenn reached out suddenly and batted the bottle from Lonigan's grasp. It thudded to the floor and went skittering across the sawdust, showering Moseby with an amber spray. Moseby never moved. There was a knife-sharp edge to his voice when he finally spoke.

"Take it easy, Foraker. You ain't so smart."

Glenn's eyelids crept slowly together. "You killed one of my boys last night, Moseby." Then, when the foreman made no reply: "You're all standin' around here primed for a fight—which one of you was gonna handle Chip? Or was it the whole five of you?"

"You can find out," Moseby said.

"Sphinx style." Scorn underlined the words. And then Glenn stood, arms suddenly pushed at an angle from his thighs.

Creed Moseby's elbow broke hip-high and his Colt seemed to flow from its holster. But he never pulled the trigger. For, at that moment a new voice rapped out, "All right!" from the side door directly behind the four Sphinx men. And Glenn, too, stayed his gun in mid-air, staring unbelievably across at the snowy hair and deep-lined face of the homesteader, John Tatum.

The old man had a rifle in his big, gnarled hands and he had it laid on Sphinx. He said quietly, "You hombres scratch air!"

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IT KNOCKED Sphinx out of the play; it evened the fight instantly.

Creed Moseby recognized this; the chagrin on his shocked face was plain to see.

"Stay out, Tatum!" he snarled. "This ain't none of your business."

"I'm makin' it my business," John Tatum said curtly.

Glenn said, "Put up your gun, Moseby," and lined his own weapon on the burly foreman's middle. The four riders at the bar, hands pushed high, backed slowly into the center of the room. Moseby hesitated only a second, then blew out a long, slow breath and chocked his Colt reluctantly back to the leather.

The bartender, having a moment before faded down behind the counter, now ventured to stand upright again. Tiny glistening beads of sweat showed on his pallid face.

Glenn turned and said, "Give me the key to your storeroom, friend." With the key in his hand he faced around, wagging the point of his gun at Sphinx. "All right," he ordered. "About face—march!"

The five men filed sullenly down the room in front of Glenn, and a moment later Glenn slammed and locked the door behind them. He came back and clapped John Tatum on the shoulder. The old nester grinned and held out his hand.

"Sheila rode in and told me you and Lonigan was headin' fer trouble, Glenn. Figured it was time fer me to pay back a little o' what yuh done fer me."

Glenn thanked him soberly and turned to the bartender, tossing the key on the bar. "Leave them hombres on ice till one o'clock," he directed. "If you turn 'em

loose before then, I'll come back and crawl your hump!"

And then Glenn and Tatum and Lonigan, who was still a little wobbly, were in the saddle and pounding out of town. There was no travel on the river trail. It wound with the foothills, looping beside a creek, passing over a small divide and finally lifting to the benchland above the Comanche. Even before they pulled up to high ground, Glenn heard the far bawling of cattle. And then he had a glimpse of Sphinx in the valley below and, within rifle-range of it, the long, straggling column of Diamond-Dot cows.

This was Washita Valley—the valley of the homesteaders; the land ran back against the mountain's slope in a continuous pattern of cultivated fields. Directly in front of Glenn's herd, a mile or two away, lay John Tatum's little farm, cradled in lush green fields. The boundary of a wheat field facing Diamond-Dot was marked by a high barbed wire fence, and Glenn's beef was heading for this.

John Tatum leaned suddenly forward. "By God, Glenn," he cried, "your old man's got yuh pocketed! Your cows'll be on my wire in ten minutes!"

This was the reason the three went pounding down the long slope of the bench. They wheeled along the ragged edge of Orin Foraker's herd, passing two startled Sphinx riders, and raced around the point of the Sphinx herd. A moment later they were in front of Diamond-Dot, and Pete Lassiter was giggling his pony up to meet them.

"Crîpes!" He jerked the word out with cranky violence. "Ben and me have been shovin' hell outa these steers, boss! But O. B. caught up with us back there."

"All right!" Glenn said. "Go back and tell Ben to keep on shaggin' 'em! I'm gonna try to turn the point!"

Stationed at the head of the column, Glenn, Lonigan and the old homesteader now began to haze the lead steers toward

Sphinx. And then, above the raucous bel-lowing of the two herds, Glenn heard horsemen approach, hidden by the thick fog of dust. Off there toward Sphinx a steady rhythm arose, of horses drumming up. Shadows appeared in the yellow haze, and shapeless outlines. And then riders bulged out of the murk, halting a hundred feet away. A voice boomed across the din.

"Don't crowd me, Glenn! I don't want no trouble, but I'll have to give it to yuh if yuh try to push me!"

Glenn recognized his father's voice even before he could distinguish the old man's solid frame. And then he stiffened. Another voice stabbed out of the haze—Creed Moseby's!

"Keep then brush-splitters outa the way, Foraker!"

In back of Glenn, Chip Lonigan's muffled oath cracked out. "That blasted bar-keep—he turned 'em loose!"

"Never mind!" Glenn gave steel to the moro, fighting to keep abreast of the lead steers, a sense of disaster sweeping over him.

Those shadows looming against the tossing horns of Sphinx were too vague to be counted, but Glenn knew O. B. must have at least six men around him; and he also knew his father's intention—to build up a solid resistance, thus forcing Glenn's herd head-on into the barbed wire of John Tatum's wheat field, now only a mile ahead. And if Diamond-Dot was hurled against that vicious barrier, the lead steers would be torn to pieces and the herd would roll up on the wire in a pulsing, bellowing tide, hoofs cutting—smashing—crippling.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death in the Afternoon

SUDDENLY Orin Foraker's big voice boomed above the din again: "You know the rules o' this range, Glenn! First outfit through the Gap has

the right o' way! And I've got yuh bottled up!"

"Maybe," Glenn yelled back at him, still giggling Blue forward.

"You goin' agin the rules?"

"You been makin' the rules long enough, O. B.! Now I'll make a few!"

"All right!" O. B.'s voice came whipping back. "We'll settle this, right now!"

Glenn's defiant reply lifted: "Let 'er flicker! We're ready as hell!"

Excitement whetted Glenn's nerves as he rode forward, hearing Creed Moseby's long loud cry, "Come on, boys!" fade into a roar of gunfire. Sphinx was moving rapidly along the edge of Diamond-Dot, through a thick fog of dust that smothered everything. The embattled herds were little more than a hundred yards apart now. And then Creed Moseby was drifting in with his men and a voice bawled, "Bust 'em up!" and a volley of shots slammed across the dust.

And then all hell broke loose on the flats. Chip Lonigan's big bay bumped into Glenn, and Lonigan called, "Watch out fer the wire, Glenn! If we hit it in this soup we're lost!" But Glenn was running on, hearing Pete Lassiter's buffalo gun boom on the left flank of Diamond-Dot.

The beef surged straight ahead—straight toward John Tatum's wire-barricaded wheat field. Glenn and his companions reefed their horses and bore hard against the point, fighting to turn it.

Riding like demons incarnate, they fought to swing the point of the now stampeding herd. Red-eyed, lanky steers were racing blindly across the flats. Glenn's gun was roaring now, hurling spears of flame across the muzzles of the frenzied leaders. The stampede was shaped like an irregular wedge, with the fastest steers fanning out in front of it. Glenn and Lonigan were at its apex; John Tatum, a little to the left. The three men were riding not only to turn the beef, but to save their lives. If the stampede failed to turn west-

ward toward Sphinx, they were sure to be carried with it to the wire and crushed.

Suddenly Creed Moseby and his men were wheeling in. One of the riders plunged straight on and pumped out a shot at Lonigan's high-riding shape. Glenn laid his gun on this man. The shot caught his horse, and Glenn watched the beast sink; he saw the rider kick free of the saddle and seem to flatten against the earth.

John Tatum's Winchester was roaring its challenge at clock-like intervals, reminding Glenn of the old homesteader's dogged patience. Suddenly Glenn yelled, "To hell with this!" and gave steel to Blue, pulling swiftly away from the herd in the direction of the wire fence. A moment later he pounded out of the dust and din at the rim of the fenced-in wheat field.

A sharp cry reached him there, and he stood up in the stirrups, reining in the horse, staring with stunned eyes. Sheila Tatum was standing there in front of that glittering wire fence! She was alone, facing the roar of the on-coming herd!

Glenn rammed Blue forward, brought him to a sliding stop at the girl's side. "Sheila!" he cried. And then he saw the metal wire-cutters in her hand, heard her cry: "Don't try to stop them! I'll cut the wire! It's your only chance!"

The girl was running swiftly, parallel with the fence, snipping at the tautly straining strands of steel.

Glenn yelled, "The wheat! Good God, Sheila, you can't—" But the roar of the on-coming stampede smothered the words. And then the girl was at his stirrup.

"Never mind the wheat!" she cried exultantly. "Let the herd go through!"

Suddenly Glenn lifted her bodily from the ground, swung her into the saddle behind him, raked the moro with his spurs. And then they were plunging on through the waist-high stand of yellow grain. Twisting in the kak, Glenn saw the wild-eyed vanguard of the beef, like an ominous brown flood, surge toward them over the

crest of a swell, less than a hundred feet away.

One moment the field of wheat stretched tawny and waving in the sunlight, the next it was obliterated by a maelstrom of tossing horns and flashing brown bodies as the thundering herd smashed through the gap in the wire and rolled onward toward the Government Trail. The beef had outrun its crew. Glenn glimpsed Lonigan and John Tatum and the others far back in the pall of dust. And off to the right, Sphinx labored through a defile in the hills, now far behind the stampeding Diamond-Dot steers.

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GLENN and Sheila swung clear of the wing of the stampede, backing up against the lip of a cutbank at the edge of the field. Glenn was jamming fresh shells into his gun and firing swiftly, turning the bunch quitters that sought to break away from the main herd. Like the tail of a giant kite, the stampede wheeled in a great circle around the Tatum homestead, following the lead steers toward the looming cleft of Humbolt Gap.

And then Pete Lassiter and Ben Ott came warping through the dust on the drag of the herd. They were wildly fanning their hats, yelling like Comanches, the earth drumming hard under the flying hoofs of their sweat-streaked ponies.

Riding double out to the flats, Glenn and Sheila joined John Tatum and Lonigan. The old nester cocked a quizzical eye at his daughter, still perched in the saddle behind Glenn. "Glad yuh had presence o' mind enough to cut that wire like yuh done, Sheila," he said.

The girl was smiling. "I knew you'd want me to, Dad," she said simply.

Glenn held out his hand for the second time that day. "We can thank you and Sheila if we make it, John," he said. "But I'm sure sorry about your wheat."

"That's all right," Tatum said composedly. "I'm too old to worry about a little wheat. You helped me git started here, Glenn—bucked your own dad to do it. And, by grab, I owe yuh a sight more'n jest a little field o' grain!"

Stationed there on the flats that now were so still, they suddenly heard the clatter of hoofs swing toward them from the hills. Three riders approached across the dust. Glenn identified the thick shape of Creed Moseby and, fanned out behind him, the two long-faced strangers who had been with him at the saloon in town. He faced the three Sphinx men as they pulled up in front of him.

Moseby was the first to speak. There was a sneer on his dark and sullen face as he said, "This party ain't finished yet, Foraker."

Glenn's answer was to swing his horse around to keep his eye on the two gunmen as they shifted cautiously to the left of the Sphinx trail boss. He said, "Get down, Sheila," and waited while the girl slid hurriedly out of the kak and took up a stand by her father. Glenn didn't know these two, but he knew their kind—he read the treachery in their narrowed eyes, in the whipped lean length of their faces.

Creed Moseby's long arms moved almost imperceptibly, and yet he seemed to be waiting for something, some sign from Glenn. A sardonic smile turned the corners of Glenn's wide mouth as he stepped to the ground. He put the moro at his shoulder, between him and the girl. Behind him, suddenly, was the sound of an advancing rider. Everybody looked around except Glenn and Moseby. The rider came in behind Glenn, calling at once: "What's up here?"

It was Orin Foraker's voice. Glenn risked a quick glance, recognizing his father. The old cowman came on until he was beside Glenn. He reined up with a cool deliberateness.

"I need yuh, Moseby," he said curtly.

"We've got to bunch the herd again. Diamond-Dot's got the Trail."

Moseby said, "I got some private business here."

Orin Foraker looked at his son. "I see yuh made it," he said. "Kinda figured yuh would." The hard line of his mouth relaxed slightly. "S'pose yuh thought that bottle business with your man Lonigan was my idea."

"The only one you fooled was yourself," Glenn said, "if it *was* your idea."

"Well, it wasn't."

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CHIP LONIGAN spoke up. "The hombre that got fooled," he broke in caustically, "was Creed Moseby. He should'a' knowed it takes at least two quarts o' bug juice to really flatten me. I was onto his little game, by grab! I knew he wanted Glenn to foller me to town. An' I knew they wasn't no two-legged skunks alive me and Glenn couldn't handle together."

A weariness showed in Orin Foraker's deep-set eyes. "Well," he said, "between you and your nester friends you've shore learnt an old dog some new tricks. I got to admit I'm licked. Diamond-Dot's in the clear for the Agency." He put his hard glance on Moseby and his men. "Come on, hombres. Let's ride."

"Not yet," Moseby said thinly. He was staring at Glenn. The two men in back of him reined their mounts hard to one side, their slitted eyes watching warily, prepared to back up the foreman instantly.

Orin Foraker pushed suddenly against Moseby's horse. "Do what I tell yuh, Creed," he repeated sharply. "Git on up there with the rest of the boys and head for home."

Moseby shook his head and one of the dark men on his left spoke for the first time. "What the hell, Creed. Yuh got him where yuh want him, go ahead!"

"Do what I told yuh!"

"I'll jest take care of this first," Moseby's hands twitched.

Orin Foraker, a faster man than his bulk indicated, swung at that moment. He hit the foreman once, knuckles slashing Moseby's cheek a glancing blow. Moseby swayed back, but at the same instant his palm slapped his gun.

Two shots blended in a single, hammering detonation. But one of those shots was Glenn Foraker's. Standing wide-legged in the dust, he drew and fired from the hip. The slug caught Moseby in the throat, slamming him out of the saddle backward to the ground. A long red line laced across Glenn's cheek where the foreman's bullet had flicked past.

The two gunhands never managed to get their weapons out. Orin Foraker's heavy voice rapped out: "Reach 'em, you two!" and he had them covered with the black muzzle of his big Peacemaker Colt. Creed Moseby lay crumpled like a sack of old rags and never stirred again.

O. B. Foraker spoke. "You, Ainsley—throw this buzzard's carcass over his saddle and tote it away from here!"

The man called Ainsley slid quickly down and obeyed, grunting from the effort. A moment later the two gunmen and their limp burden loped away. When they had vanished in the blue heat-haze of the southern hills, Orin Foraker put away his gun and turned to Glenn.

"I was loco for keepin' that hombre on," he said. "When he burned your friend Tatum off our East Forty I should-a' knowed he was no good."

"Now he's quit, as you might say," Glenn remarked ironically, "I suppose you'll be roddin' Sphinx yourself."

"Not unless I have to," the old man said slowly. "I'd kinda hoped to take a vacation for a while. Go down to Henrietta, 'fore I git to the point where I gotta be shoved around in a wheel chair. But I

gotta leave Sphinx in the hands of a man I kin trust. How 'bout you takin' over for me, Glenn? You c'd run your cows along with mine, couldn't yuh?"

He glanced suddenly at Sheila Tatum, standing tensely over against her father's horse. And he grinned at her. "Mebbe you and your gal c'd manage to fergive a damn' old fool. How 'bout it, Miss Tatum? I know yuh ain't got much reason fer likin' an hombre like me. But I promise to make up fer some o' the things I done to yuh and your father."

Sheila Tatum's hazel eyes were suddenly eager, friendly. "Why, of course Glenn will do it!" she said warmly. "Won't you, Glenn?"

Glenn came to life. "Well, sure—sure I'll do it," he said. "And thanks, O. B." Glenn was realizing that it took a real man to admit he'd been wrong. And now, Glenn felt a sudden resurgence of the old respect, the old admiration, for his father.

At that moment Stud Lomax, the Sphinx top hand, came riding up. His face was flushed and angry. "Look'a' here, O. B.!" he sputtered. "Some of our stuff has got into Diamond-Dot, and that ornery fool, Lassiter, won't let us cut the herd fer it!"

"The hell with it!" Orin Foraker said. "No need o' cuttin' fer them cows. Diamond-Dot . . . Sphinx—they ain't no difference now. And, by grab, it's the biggest damn' outfit in Texas, boy!"

"Hey, Glenn! Where the hell yuh goin'?" It was Chip Lonigan's high-pitched voice. And he had just hauled a bottle of Valley Tan from his saddle bag, was waving it high in the air.

But Glenn Foraker was moving off, pulling Blue behind him at the end of the bridle. He had his other arm around Sheila Tatum's slim waist, and never looked around. But Sheila did. And she was smiling as she waved farewell.

STOREKEEPER'S HARDWARE PAYOFF

By Ralph Berard

A BREATHLESS, deathlike silence clutched Little Sandy Town's main street in a tenacious, hot, noon-time grip. Or perhaps it only seemed so to Jarve Colburn, who sat in a comfortable high-backed chair in front of his hardware store. Jarve's intimate knowledge of this little cowtown and its peo-

ple enabled him to detect the prospect of violence with the uncanny accuracy of a clairvoyant.

Jarve was expecting a killing!

He had sat in the chair on the wooden sidewalk during the siesta hour for many weeks now because he did not know which day the killing would be. Each day he

To rid Turnaround Valley range of a man-killing land hog and win security for the laughing child he loved, would a genial town father meet Satan's own gunguard, in a test where his own life was forfeit . . . whether he won or lost?



Jarve's voice was low. "Murderer! Rustler! Now, even worse than that, Reece Kelton—coward!"

had watched with misgivings when Sheriff Jim Fletcher closed up his office across the street and went to lunch. Fletcher was a good lawman. He should have known a killing was in the making.

Reece Kelton already had shot down too many promising young ranchers. He was a land-grabber, and the polite-sounding term 'self-defense' didn't set well with old Jarve—not when a quick-drawing two-gun killer like Kelton deliberately lured a fine young fellow into a battle in which he didn't have a chance.

Besides the reputation of the town he had founded, Jarve had the future of his twenty-year-old daughter, Marion, to think about. Since her mother's death in child-birth she had always been Jarve's little baby. He wanted Little Sandy to remain a place where she could live, be married and raise a family without the constant fear that Kelton might badger her husband into a fight and then kill him.

The old hardware merchant wasn't surprised when Jed Rounds rode up to the watering trough across the street and dismounted. The young rancher tossed his bridle strap over the rail and came resolutely across the street. Almost at the same instant Jarve heard the heavy-booted footsteps behind him. He turned in his chair and saw Reece Kelton coming from what he called his real estate office. Jarve recognized a rhythmic foreboding of death in the sound of those boots on the loosely nailed boards of the walk.

Rounds stopped. He stood in the middle of the street, directly in front of Jarve, his feet spread apart a little. He was about thirty, a lithe, well built, stalwart-looking chap. But his wide belt squeezed into too much stomach. His gun hung on his right hip clumsily. Rounds wasn't a gunman.

Kelton was. Middle-aged. Yes, but with a slender, tall alertness. A brace of ivory-handled pistols hung in their hol-

sters with a certain cruel gracefulness, speaking silently of death, suggesting eloquently how experienced their owner was in dealing it out.

Townspeople began poking their heads guardedly from door jams. Faces appeared at second-story windows. The silence settled like a weight. Jarve looked toward Fletcher's office. His eyes darted up and down the sidewalks. The sheriff was not in sight.

Kelton walked forward, close to Jed Rounds. He stopped. A cold, sneering smile seamed his hard-lined face. "Were ya lookin' fer me, Rounds?"

Rounds grooved his tongue about his dry lips. His face paled through its tan. "I'm missing cattle off my Triple Bar spread," he said.

"Where ya reckon they went?" Kelton sneered.

Color leaped into Rounds' cheeks. It was sudden anger and determination which made Jarve Colburn proud of the rancher. But it was bad. Any emotion was bad when you had to be cool, when your life depended on cool nerve and a quick draw.

"Everybody knows ye're a thief," Rounds said flatly. "Yer real estate office is nothin' but a blind fer sellin' stolen property, property that yer gun-totin' killers force into yer hands by stealin' honest men's cattle."

The cold, confident smile never changed on Kelton's thick lips. "Ya backin' them words with yer cutter?" the killer asked quietly. He even lifted his hand a little away from his gun.

During one age-long minute they stood there. The two faced each other, one calm, quiet, waiting; the other trembling with anger and righteous desire for justice. Rounds' horse nickered where it was tied at the trough. There was no other sound. The rancher's chin trembled visibly with his mounting rage. No longer to be restrained by his will, his right hand stabbed for a gun. The weapon

cleared leather, the barrel started to swing up to level.

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ROUNDS died like that. His gun arced upward from his grasp without going off, dropped in the dust. He collapsed into himself, his arms reaching out lifelessly.

Kelton stood still, looked down at the man he had killed. A little curl of blue smoke spiraled from his gun. Then he stepped toward Jarve. "You saw it, didn't ya, Colburn?"

Without answering immediately Jarve rose from his chair. He moved out, as others were doing, to stand looking down at the remains of another man who had given his life to preserve what right-thinking folks wanted in any town.

Sheriff Fletcher came, finally, elbowing to the center of the group that had gathered. Fletcher's hand dropped to his gunbelt. Jarve thought the sheriff looked disappointed, as if caressing the gun handle was poor solace for the way he was feeling. Then Jarve answered Reece Kelton. "I saw what happened," he said.

"You saw Rounds draw first," Kelton insisted.

"I saw that."

The sheriff spoke to Kelton. "Just how did it happen?" Jarve knew Fletcher was checking his anger with an effort.

"Rounds drew a gun on me an' I had to kill 'im," Kelton explained suavely.

Fletcher had a firm chin. He didn't flinch before the killer's insolent manner. "You're buying a lot of land mighty cheap, ain't you, Kelton? Don't you get most of it from dead men's families or from ranchers who go broke from having their cattle rustled? You got any explanation for that?"

"I buy land when I think the price is right." Kelton smiled confidently. "How's

that connected with this man tryin' to kill me?"

Fletcher said pointedly, "I can't prove the connection just yet. If I could I wouldn't be standing here arguing."

Kelton's grin showed the long white scar in his right cheek. "It ain't so good, Sheriff, to take sech an attitude."

The killer moved toward his office with an insolent swagger. Fletcher stood watching him go, and Jarve saw in the sheriff's face, only in lesser degree, the same anger and hate he had seen in Jed Rounds'.

Jarve went into his store. He waited on customers without his usual bantering, joking, light-hearted manner. He didn't look toward the street when the undertaker's rig stopped for the body. He was glad it was done, though, before Marion rode up on her little paint pony and dismounted in front of the store.

Marion hurried inside, her youthful, round face flushed with excitement. She looked more beautiful and seemed more happy than Jarve had ever seen her. She rushed up to him, put a slender arm over each of his shoulders and clasped her fingers behind his neck.

"Harry and I are going to be married," she confided, in an excited whisper. "His father gave him the north eighty of the Twisted Q, and he's saved enough money so we can start our own spread."

Jarve's arm went around her. He squeezed her so close his chin lapped her right shoulder and her soft yellow hair brushed his rough cheek. That was because he loved her. He was happy for her. But she mustn't see the feelings that might be betrayed in his face or his eyes. Jarve knew what his little baby was facing, a lot better than she did.

Young Harry Brandt would build his spread and run his cattle on the most valuable eighty acres in the whole Turn-around Valley. It adjoined Kelton's big Circle X and was the land that Kelton

would most want to control. Silver Creek ran through it.

Jarve forced a smile. "Young Brandt's a fine lad," he said. "I'm glad it's him my Marion's marryin', and it's both of you I'll be blessing when the time comes."

Marion almost danced up and down in her happiness.

Jarve, continuing to smile, felt the responsibility of suggesting a warning. "'Course," he said, "Harry ain't much of a gun hand."

Marion straightened and pushed away from him, frightened. He couldn't stand her wide-eyed look of distress and hurried to add, "Reckon now that the Indians is mostly killed or stowed away on reservations, there's not much need for gun-fightin' any more."

Jarve Colburn didn't look his fifty years

Jarve didn't talk much any more, but he remembered those early days. After all the hard, careful years he had watched so alertly over Marion's happiness her engagement now increased his pleasure and satisfaction at the same time that it sent the certain premonition of impending disaster coursing through his veins.

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THE NEXT morning he crossed the street to talk with Sheriff Fletcher. Jarve could see how seriously the lawman was considering the matter.

"I know just how you feel," Fletcher said. "Kelton killed Rounds yesterday just as he did Ken Hogan, two months ago."

"If Marion marries Harry Brandt,"

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as he stood there smiling re-assuringly at Marion. His high, even forehead, clear blue eyes and thin lips gave a healthy, youthful look in spite of the gray that dappled his temples. He felt no older than when he had founded the town. Little Sandy knew little of its own history.

Folks called Jarve "The Hardware Man." A few older citizens called him "Father of the Town." Asked for details, though, they could only scratch their heads doubtfully.

"Believe he told us he brought Marion here when she was only a baby," they'd say. "The settlers' wagons used to camp nights on the sandy bar inside where the river turns. Colburn set up a tent, started repairing wagons. Later, when the cattlemen drove herds north and took up this land, he built his store and the town grew up around him."

Jarve told the sheriff, "Kelton will start taking their cattle, too." The lines in his face were hard now, his lips compressed. "Then this will happen again."

Fletcher sat silent, his face worried. "I've done all I know how to do," he said thoughtfully, after a little. "I've put on extra deputies, had Kelton trailed and had secretly deputized men ride night herd on some of the ranches. Can you suggest anything else, Jarve?"

With it put to him that way, Jarve could see the sheriff's problem. He didn't have an answer, at least not one he could talk about to the law. With no real evidence, the sheriff was pretty helpless. "I see now why ya lock up at noon," he said.

"Yeah," Fletcher admitted reluctantly. "Rounds would have hated me if I'd tried to stop that fight. It was a matter of honor with him. Young fellows always

feel that way, that they have a right to accuse a man openly, then shoot it out with him." Fletcher shrugged. "They *have* got that right. I'd just make enemies trying to talk them out of it; they'd find another place and shoot it out anyway."

The sheriff's words were true—too damn true. Jarve thanked him, rose and went out. Sometimes young fellows had to be saved from their own foolishness.

Jarve went back into his store, walked to the back and lifted a trapdoor. He wished someone had saved him from himself when he had been young.

He hesitated briefly, thinking of what was hidden down there in the cellar. An odd smile wreathed his lips for a moment. Maybe some sort of destiny *did* take care of young fellows. Maybe there *was* a guiding influence that took care of the part each hombre was to play in the drama of life.

He heard Marion's footsteps coming from the rear room. He dropped the door shut quickly, before she had seen it. The girl was still excited. She skipped toward him, smiling. Jarve read in her eyes what she was thinking.

"Get on yer horse," he told her, "and ride out and see him. I'll take care of the store."

Marion put her arms around him again, squeezed him. "You must have been young once, Dad." Then she was gone. Jarve stood listening to the *clop-clop* of her pony's hoofs in the dust. . . .

And all the days went by for Marion as happily as that until a few months later when she and Harry Brandt were married. Harry had his spread started by then, and a herd of thoroughbred cattle. Not more than six weeks after their wedding Marion came to the store one day, traces of tears still in her eyes, lines of worry in her face.

Jarve had been waiting, watching. He put his arm about her shoulder. "What's

the matter with my little baby?" he said. But he already knew.

"We don't deserve this trouble," Marion sobbed. "A dozen of our best steers were taken again last night. Harry was starting for town with a gun, but I got it away from him. We quarreled about it. Finally he promised not to start trouble this time. He swears, though, if it happens again, he'll ride in and. . . ." Marion's voice broke. Her shoulders quivered with her sobbing. "Father, Kelton will kill Harry like he did those other two men."

Jarve felt very calm, even calmer than he, himself, could understand. He was looking past his daughter, over her shoulder, at the street, at the spot where a short time before Jed Rounds' body had lain in the dust. He didn't see the street though. The scene in his mind was of a young man, a young man with a gun. There was a little spiral of smoke from the gun. But it wasn't Jed Rounds who was holding the gun. It wasn't Kelton either. Jarve shook his head to dislodge that scene from the past.

"Reckon nothing like that is going to happen," he said, and he must have stiffened and grown colder just then, because Marion backed away and stood staring at him. Jarve smiled, a very forceful, youthful, confident smile. "Don't worry, child."

When she was gone Jarve lifted the trapdoor. He lit the dirty-chimneyed lantern that had long hung unused at the top of the half-rotted cellar steps and he climbed carefully down. He went straight to a very old brass-banded strong box that was as big as a trunk. For eighteen years, since he had taken the box from his temporary tent home on the sand spit at the curve of Little Sandy River and moved it here, he had not looked inside.

Old, long-forgotten memories came up out of the chest as he opened it. Thoughts threatened to overcome him, to slow his

probing fingers. But he moved on with decision and purpose.

From inside a pair of black satin trousers that had gold-braided seams running up and down them, he unrolled a beautifully beaded cartridge belt which held two perfectly matched custom-made .38 calibre cap and ball pistols.

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HIS FACE was an expressionless mask as he examined those weapons. Then little darts of light began to streak back and forth in his eyes. A strange and unexplainable pleasure, like hot wine, crept through his veins. He set the lantern down, snapped the belt around his waist. He drew his hands up past the butts of those guns. He held them in his hands, flipped them into position. These were unfailing friends. They were the law. Jarve's law.

"Pshaw," he said half aloud. "Guess I'm havin' a bad dream." Lantern in one hand, guns and belt in the other, he climbed the tottering stairway, up out of the past. He blew out the lantern, hung it again on its rusty nail. The gunbelt, with its two weapons loaded and ready, he carried to the front of the store and hung on a nail just inside the door.

They were there one day at noon, three weeks later, when Harry Brandt tossed his bridletrap over the hitch rack across at the watering trough. Jarve was sitting in his chair on the boardwalk. Harry started across the street and Jarve knew by the preoccupied look of him what was likely to happen.

Harry was a handsome young rancher, the kind of son-in-law any man could be proud of. He and Jarve got along like father and son. But Harry didn't even see Jarve Colburn today. He hurried across the street, his chin quivering with anger, his gray eyes, that usually sparkled with life and happiness, now set hard.

Jarve sat quietly, waiting to see if Harry would speak. But Harry hurried past his chair, straight toward Reece Kelton's office.

Jarve got up. He moved quickly, stepped inside the store door, swung immediately back to the street. He buckled on the gunbelt as he fell in step behind the boy.

Jarve was aware of the faint odor of dried prairie grass that rode down the autumn air. It was roundup season. Quite a few punchers were in town. They watched with puzzled eyes, for there had never been a killing exactly like this one promised to be.

Jarve's even, measured strides made no sound in the soft dust. Reece Kelton saw Harry through his office window and stepped out to meet him. He did not see Jarve at first.

Kelton stepped into the street. Harry stopped abruptly. He raised slightly on the balls of his feet. His arms stiffened at his sides. They bent slightly at the elbows.

"I'm missing cattle this morning," he intoned almost breathlessly.

A hideous expectant grin grooved Kelton's features. "Yeah," he acknowledged. Then he saw Jarve, almost within arm's length of Harry Brandt.

Harry heard the step behind him and turned.

Jarve took a deep breath and swallowed. "Sorry, lad." His right fist came up with surprising speed and power. It caught Harry square on the nob of the chin. Harry fell while the puzzled, questioning look was still forming on his face.

Jarve stepped past him. He didn't glance down. He faced Reece Kelton and said in a calm unemotional drawl, "This time you'll have to draw first."

Kelton stiffened. This wasn't Jed Rounds he was facing. This wasn't Harry Brandt. Just the hardware man from down the street.

BUT KELTON was not deceived. He possessed a killer's uncanny ability to measure the man he faced. This was a different Jarve Colburn, a man Kelton had never seen before. He was silent, not trusting his own voice.

Jarve's eyes, cold as ice, held the killer's. His voice was soft, low. "Murderer! Rustler! Now, even worse than that, Reece Kelton—coward!"

Again that age-long minute.

Kelton's hand flashed down. His fingers clasped the gun-butt. The weapon rose from leather. And a tiny spot of red appeared on his white shirt front. Blood spurted with the report of Jarve's .38. The stain spread. Reece Kelton gulped. His gun sagged, his failing fingers clutching it, clawing it, dropping it. He crumpled in the middle, gasped in the agonizing convulsions of death and fell in the dust.

Jarve turned on his heel. He headed straight for Jim Fletcher's office. He was sitting on a corner of the lawman's desk five minutes later when someone got word to the sheriff. He let his shoulders sag wearily; he unbuckled the belt from his waist and laid the guns on the desk.

Fletcher stepped to the window and pulled the blinds against the curious stare of the crowd outside. Then he locked the door and sat down.

"All right, Jarve," he said. "Tell me about it."

Jarve sighed, then smiled. He felt all right. He was satisfied. This was just the final scene. He unbuttoned his shirt, took a large folded sheet of paper from inside and spread it on the lawman's desk. It was a reward dodger, dated at Dodge City, Kansas, more than twenty years before and offering five thousand dollars reward for the Breckinridge Kid.

"I met a girl I loved," Jarve said slowly, "and thought a bandit could make

a new start. We were married. Then she died when Marion was born. I came here and started life over, down there on the sand bar where the river turns."

Jarve blinked his eyes a couple of times and pointed. "If you hadn't pulled the blind we could see the very spot, down past the livery barn."

Fletcher sat very still, just looking at him, not saying anything.

Jarve shrugged again. "So I came in to surrender."

Fletcher's fingers began tapping on his desk, his eyes a trifle moist. "Breckinridge Kid, eh? Sounds like history I read about some place, some place a long time ago. Seems like one time he was the fastest draw in all Kansas."

Fletcher drew the dodger forward, looked at the picture, glanced at Jarve. "Remarkable likeness; quite a coincidence." He folded the notice, refolded it, finally got it creased in the same dirty creases, then he walked over and stuffed it into the air-tight heater that stood in a corner, took a match from his pocket and set it afire.

"Them old-time, quick-shooting, reckless young fellows always died young, didn't they, Jarve? Twenty years and more, the Breckinridge Kid's been dead. It's a long time."

Then they were shaking hands. Jarve never knew just how. He blinked and Fletcher laughed.

Jarve went back across the street. He realized suddenly that his knuckles were sore. People looked at him oddly. But that didn't last very long. Some customers came in and he was just their hardware man again.

Marion and Harry came. Jarve saw the nasty-looking bruised spot on the point of Harry's chin and he wondered how the devil he would explain why he had hit him. But Harry didn't mention it.

So Jarve didn't either.

One was mean on the surface, and one was mean underneath. Yet it took a fortune in buried gold to tell which had the ugly, conscienceless heart to bring White Angel Mountain and its graybeard prospector tumbling down in a rain of ruin and death!



He couldn't make it.
I tried to tell him.

THE MEANEST HOMBRE

By
Thomas Barclay
Thomson

THERE'S all kinds of meanness in humans, but it seems like the worst is the kind that don't show on the surface, but lays deep underneath like a coiled viper. Take Judd Lacey. I reckon he's about the meanest man in the where-

abouts of Paydirt. He owns a nice rich mine and drives his men till they sweat bone-marrow, but he drives hisself twice as hard. He yells and scowls and ups with his big fists when somebody gets cross-ways of his path, and knocks 'em to hell-

and-gone, but he's always on the right side, seems like, and you know he's going to be there, beforehand.

Then there's Quinn Kimball, who mostly hangs around the Red Heart Saloon down in Paydirt. Quinn's got a thin, fragile look and, with his yellow hair all plastered down and his thin, small mouth quirked up in a smile, when he wants to get on your good side, you'd think he's a saint. And Quinn would knife his grandma, on his maw's side, for two-bits cash. Quinn's pure p'izen, heart and soul.

That's why I was plain worried when I found out that Quinn, who'd never done a day's work, honest or otherwise, in his whole misspent life, had staked him out a claim on the far side of White Angel Mountain, close to old Pop Mason's diggings. He was meaning somebody no good, Pop probably.

Pop had been good to me and I liked him. It ain't everybody what'll treat an old bar-swamp human the way Pop always done me, and I wanted to pay him back some day. This looked like maybe the time. I went to Judd Lacey about it.

Now, Quinn Kimball was Judd's special skunk-in-the-meathouse. Judd charged the state of the weather and the high price of levis in all Western states to Quinn. This time was no exception.

"What's that low-down hell-scrapin's doin' followin' Pop over there?" he yelled. "Has Pop found somethin' he wants?"

"Pop's got a mine," I said. "And he's found a pocket that he's workin' out. He was aimin' to keep it a secret."

"And he started by confidin' in you. Why, you dang-whiffed, no-'count, blat-mouthed old fool! I've a notion to bat you out from between your ears!"

I backed away and fixed my feet for travel. Judd's meaner than pop-skull whiskey when he's r'iled. I wished I hadn't come to him with Pop's troubles.

"Seems like you'd learn to keep that scatter-mouth of yourn shut," he rumbled, staring at me like he was looking for a likely place to start chewing on.

"It ain't me," I defended. "It's Drussie Dorgan. Pop told her."

"Drussie Dorgan!" Judd roared it like he was trying to holler her up from the other side of the mountain. "You mean the scrub-lady down to the Grand Union Hotel? The one that's a widow—with five kids?"

There was a different tone in his voice, and I felt safer. "That's her," I said. "She's Pop's daughter. Pop was married once, way back. Him and his woman set great store by Drussily, but she wed that triflin' Tex Dorgan, and his mistreatment—up till he got a dose o' deserved hot lead—and them five kids needin' things, seemed to take all the gimp outta her. Not but what she loves all five of 'em, and works herself peaked supporting 'em."

"Drussie Dorgan! Pop's girl!" Judd said it low, for him. You couldn't heard it more'n half a mile. Then, back to his regular tones: "How'd Quinn Kimball get hold of it? How'd she come to tell him? And how do you know so much about it?"

"Drussie told me. It's been worryin' her. Quinn knows about her and Pop, and when he suspected somethin' was up about the mine, he deviled it out o' her."

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J UDD'S big hands opened and shut, hungry like. Quinn Kimball could thank his lucky stars he wasn't in reach. Judd was big; too big for most doors, up and down and sideways, and mighty sudden, besides. I knowed what was ailing Judd, and I hated to tell him, but it was best.

"Pop told me about you grubstakin'

him all these years," I said. "He's goin' to pay you back before he even starts dividin' with Drussie. Pop's honest."

"Grubstake! Pay me back!" Judd yelled, and I'd have run, only I was too scared. "My dealin's with him didn't include no grubstakin'. And I ain't goin' to listen to no such."

There it was. Judd was mean—and grasping, to boot. Likely he was getting ready to claim the whole kit-and-kaboodle of Pop's gold mine, not satisfied with what he was sweating out of them over-worked Swedes in his own shaft. Funny how none of them squareheads never quit him. Scared to, likely.

"Now you listen!" Judd reached out a fist two sizes bigger'n a ham, and grabbed me and give me a couple of shakes, just to show he wasn't joking. "Linda's fixin' Pop a basket of table fodder, and you was due to tote it over to White Angel, right after dinner. But you ain't waitin'. You grab yourself a sandwich and start travelin'."

"But what about Quinn! If he's up to any dirty work—"

"Stir your stumps!" Judd roared, and added a few extra shakes. "And don't stand argyin' all day. It's a easy two hours over there and the same back. I'll add an hour for visitin', and if you ain't back by three o'clock I'm comin' after you. If that lowdown Quinn Kimball—well, I'm aimin' to fit his name to a headstone anyhow, and the sooner the better."

"Boothill's the only place where his name'd look good to me," I agreed, and skedaddled. They ain't any use sticking around, inviting trouble to slap you endways.

I reckon there never was a pair so different as Judd Lacey and his wife, Linda. He's big and tough and's got straight, tawny hair, and his big head is set on knobs of shoulders, and he cusses and gives orders right and left, and folks busts theirselves doing what he says.

His wife, Linda, though, is little and cute, and yellow-haired, with brown eyes, and she talks low and looks appealing. Even Mrs. Dyster, who's been Judd's housekeeper for years, and don't fear man nor devil nor Judd Lacey, waits on her like she's some precious baby, and would scratch the eyes out of anybody who'd say a cross word to Linda. She treats her like her own baby.

Me? Well, Linda's the only reason I'm working for Judd and liking it even one little bit. Reckon she makes me think of my little girl who died of black diphtheria when she was a baby. I like to think she'd o' growed up and been just like Linda. Sometimes the danged tears come to my eyes, just lookin' at her.

Anyhow, here was Linda, a-putting the final touches on a basket she's fixed for Pop. "There," she said, as I eased through the door. "It's ready. As soon as you've eaten—"

"I'm leavin' now," I told her. "Want to get back soon."

"Goodness!" She spoke brisk-like. "Then you just wait till I fix you a couple sandwiches. Won't take me more than two seconds."

Seems like Linda always knowed what to do, and when. She reached for the loaf of bread, the butcher knife, and the chunk of roast, and started building them sandwiches. She spread plenty butter on, and cut the meat thick. When she finished, them sandwiches was fit for a king. Fact is, a king'd be danged lucky to get that food.

"They'll keep you from starving, Swampy," she smiled, handing them to me. "And I'll have a nice warm supper ready when you get back. I know Pop'll like some home cooking for a little change."

"Yes'm," I said, backing for the door. "Pop gets a change danged seldom. And I'll be back, come three o'clock."

I hoped I was right.

I WASN'T rightly expecting to find Pop home, and was about to h'ist a window and get inside for a mite of snooping, when the door opened sudden, and I found myself gazing into the unwinking stare of a sixgun.

"Come right in, Swampy!" Quinn Kimball invited, and I hustled to accept. That gun-barrel appeared downright determined. "So you've come messin' into what don't concern you," Quinn went on. "I'd a killed you, right off, only I'm settlin' a few things with you first."

I remembered some happenings down in the Red Heart Saloon, when I'd helped equalize a gun advantage he'd held over Judd Lacey, and Judd about whaled the living daylight out of him thereafter. And Quinn was one to carry a grudge for years and never lose a drop of the venom. My hide wasn't worth a lead dollar, Mex.

"I'm lookin' for Pop," I told him, actin' brave, but not feeling that way. "Got some home-cooked vittels for him."

"I'll take 'em," Quinn said, and did. "Don't you go abusin' them vittels," I warned. "They was sent over, special, by Linda Lacey, Judd's wife."

I shouldn't said that. Quinn's trouble with Judd come from him trying to manhandle Linda, when she was singing at the Red Heart. Quinn's eyes looked like a rattlesnake's set to strike. Then he laughed, and it sounded like a file raspin' on a dull saw. It made shivers start chasing up and down my spine.

"I've been hankerin' for a taste of that woman's cookery," he said. "Here's where I do some samplin'."

He tied me up till I couldn't more'n wiggle my ears, then spread out the grub on Pop's small table. Fried chicken, from Linda's little pen of fowls. Biscuits wrapped up so's they were still hot, potatoes cooked in some fancy way and a big slab of apple pie to top off with. Quinn boiled up some coffee and had him-

self a meal, with myself looking on.

"It's right handy, you droppin' in," Quinn said, betwixt mouthfuls. "Hadn't figgered out what to do. Now I've got it."

"What you plannin'?" I asked, knowin' I wouldn't like the answer.

He laughed, and reached for a chicken breast. "You're goin' to have a fight. With Pop Mason. You're goin' to kill him."

"Who, me?" I screamed. "I won't do it! You can't make me!"

"Oh, yes, I can." He cackled again, contented-like. "You're going to bash Pop's head in with a shovel, so's to get his gold. Then, before he goes down, he's going to put a slug through your heart. Oh, I'll have the gun and your body and everything, to prove it, and a letter Pop's goin' to write, sayin' what's happened, and givin' me the mine for tryin' to rescue him. I've always craved a nice payin' gold mine. Now I've got it."

He pushed more food into his mouth and chewed away. Quinn Kimball was the devil, himself, reborn.

Then I remembered Judd Lacey.

"You won't do no such thing!" I yelled. "Your plans for killin' Pop and me won't work."

"No?" he drawled, sweet-like. "Because why?"

"Because Judd Lacey's comin' over to see Pop this afternoon."

Then I knowed he was the devil on earth, from the look I seen come over his face. They was fear there, too, plenty of fear. He had a right to be scared of Judd Lacey. Judd would tear him apart, bare-handed. Then he began to look less afraid.

"Mebby that's all to the good," he said, slow. "Mebby things ain't so bad, after all. With Judd Lacey out o' the way, I could make that yaller-haired woman o' his see reason."

"No!" I screamed at him. "You ain't

goin' do no such thing! Why, Linda would spit on you—"

"Not more'n once, she wouldn't," he said. "I know how to tame 'em. And I'll relish tamin' her. She'll take Quinn Kimball, and like it."

"You dirty polecat!" I mouthed. "You low-down piece o' hell-spewin's!"

He got up, come over to me, and started slapping me. Not awful hard, but he kept at it. First one side, then the other, and all the time slapping harder. My ears rung, until pretty soon I couldn't hear a thing. But he kept slapping. Finally, I sort of passed out. When I come to, I was slumped down against the ropes that tied me, and Quinn was finishing his meal.

"That'll teach you to keep a civil tongue in your head," he told me. "I don't take that kind of talk from dirty bar-swamps."

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WHAT could I do? Nothing. He went back in the mine, and left me, and I knowed he was going in to see Pop. Pop wasn't already dead. Maybe Judd would find a way to outwit Quinn Kimball. After all, he knowed what to expect when he come over. Quinn might be smart, but Judd Lacey was the biggest, strongest, daringest man in the whole country. Maybe in the whole world. And mean, to boot. I'd have loved to see them big hands shutting down on Quinn Kimball.

"We're goin' to meet Judd Lacey," Quinn said, nodding that slick yellow head of his. "About time for us to be movin' down the trail. I'll arrange a meetin' place in Coldwater."

Coldwater! That's below where Judd would be. The trail from his place follows up Blue Gulch, over the ridge, and down across Mantilla Canyon. When it lifts again, it's on the ridge that goes straight along to White Angel Mountain.

To get into Coldwater, Judd would have to turn back when he comes out of Mantilla, and follow the down-trail. Coldwater was the heaviest wooded canyon thereabouts, and so chockful of underbrush that no man could ever get through it except along the narrow trail that led along its bottom.

Quinn got ready. He buckled on his gun-belt, took a quick look at his gun to see was it in working order, put a piece of candle and some matches in his pocket, then come over and loosed my feet.

"You'll give less trouble with your hands tied," he told me. "Now get goin'!"

"Look here," I begun, "I told you I wouldn't—"

He slapped me again, plenty hard. "You'll do what I say," he warned, "or you'll wish you'd never been born. I'm runnin' this show."

I don't want anybody to get me wrong. In my younger days I'd enjoyed tangling with Quinn Kimball, with maybe one hand tied behind me; but now I'm getting on, not the man I once was, and both hands was tied. And nobody likes getting slapped to sleep. Maybe I've just been a bar-swamp too long. Anyhow, I headed down the trail a piece.

There wasn't much talking done. I was busy trying to figure out Quinn's scheme to finish Judd, and still busier trying to keep ahead. He sure was a traveler.

"What's the rush?" I objected once. "We got plenty time."

Then I got kicked. A kick that almost pushed my spine a pair of inches up into my hat. My feet didn't work right from that minute on, it was that hard.

We got to the crest above Mantilla Canyon, and we hadn't seen anything of Judd. "We'll stop now," Quinn said, "and wait for the rescue party." He laughed, nasty. "Rescue party!" he repeated, like that.

Then we seen Judd coming along the

far rim of Mantilla. It takes a good twenty minutes from there to where we was standing. Judd didn't see us till Quinn hollered, loud. Judd stoppped, cold. Just looking.

When he seen us, Quinn waved, then pointed down the trail into Coldwater. After that he give me a push, and another kick, and we was on our way. I glimpsed Judd already running, hurrying to get across to us. Judd acts quick.

But we got down into Coldwater in no time, and Quinn raked up a lot of dead leaves and dry grass, and set the candle up in the middle, then lit it. He was setting a fire! I got it all in a flash. There was a trail up the canyon bed. We'd follow that and get out, while Judd, unsuspecting, would follow us and the fire would catch him. Only Quinn had made a mistake, the way I figured it. He'd allowed that candle too much time. Judd would be too far ahead of the fire to get hurt.

I was still chuckling over Quinn's failing to realize how fast Judd Lacey traveled in the hills, when we come to where the trail forked. We was right on the edge of a smart drop into the creek-bed, when Quinn turned and swung his gun-butt up. I seen it coming, but couldn't dodge. There come a feeling of tumbling down, and down, then I didn't know a thing.

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WHEN I come to, there was Judd, swabbing my face with cold water from the stream. It revived me in a hurry I groaned and twisted around, and tried to get up. Then I recollected there was a fire somewhere. I made it to my feet.

"Take your time," Judd said, and helped me. "Lucky I found you. Wouldn't have, if your hat hadn't dropped off, just as you took a dive over

the edge. You're damn lucky, Swampy."

My hat, right where Quinn put it to bait the trap for Judd! "How long?" I croaked. "The fire. . ."

"Plumb crazy," Judd said. "I've been here about ten minutes, and I didn't build any fire."

"Quinn did!" I yelled. "Down the canyon!"

Judd looked up. "By hellity-damn," he bellowed, "there is a fire! We got to go!"

I seen the devilish cleverness of Quinn Kimball, then. The fire had drawn up Mantilla Canyon, and already there was no way out for us except right up the bed of Coldwater.

"Get goin'!" Judd yelled. "We gotta get out o' here!" I took a step and slumped right down again. My side hurt something cruel. "Go on!" I motioned him to clear out. "Can't make it. Bad hurt!"

I heard cuss-words come out of his mouth that ought never to come from any God-born man. But I knowed they was for Quinn Kimball, safe somewhere. Judd reached down and grabbed me like I was a toy doll, slung me over his shoulder, and started up the trail, running. Running and carrying me, a man growed, even if I was worthless.

But he couldn't make it. I tried to tell him. What was the use of both of us being burned? I could twist my head and see the black smoke boiling up below. And I knowed how fast a fire could travel in a canyon like Coldwater, with plenty of fuel to feed on, and a good draft of wind to carry it.

"Put me down," I begged. "It ain't no use."

"Shut your yap!" he panted, eating up the ground in long leaps. Honest, I didn't seem to weigh ten pounds to him. I tried to squirm loose, and he reached up, give my foot a twist that made me yell. "Keep still," he growled, "or I'll tear you to

bits. I'm goin' to save you, whether you like it or not!"

There was a steep rock wall at the upper end of Coldwater, with a ladder wired to the cliff for climbing out. Once out of the canyon, it would be pretty level going right to the mouth of Pop's tunnel. We'd be safe there, if we could make it. Then we reached the end of the canyon, and seen what sort of devil we was dealing with in Quinn Kimball.

The ladder was gone, just the wires left dangling. He'd climbed up, cutting the ladder loose as he went, then hauled it up behind him, leaving us to burn. Our passing would look accidental enough for anybody's jury.

Judd never wasted no time. "Climb on my shoulders and reach! Grab the lower limb of that silver spruce . . . swing over to the trunk . . . climb up and out on that big limb on the other side. Then you can drop off almost in the trail!"

I looked. And ding-whizzled, if he wasn't right. He boosted me up. "I ain't never left a job for another man to finish before," he said. "And it near wrecks me to do it this time, but there ain't no help for it."

So he was going to stay there and roast! I started climbing down off his shoulders. There ain't much man left in me, but I couldn't run out on a fellow being like that, even if it was Judd Lacey, the meanest man I'd ever seen.

"Back up you go!" He twisted my foot something terrible. "It's your job to see that Quinn Kimball gets what's coming to him."

"I'll never be able to live this down, Judd Lacey," I told him. "There's Linda and—"

"I'm still givin' orders," he bellowed. "And I ain't lettin' Quinn Kimball get away with nothin'. H'ist, up you go!"

Up I went, with him hollering after me. Something about looking after Linda—and about Drussie Dorgan, which I didn't

quite get. Maybe didn't want to. It didn't look reasonable that he'd be telling me to take Drussie's property, that had been her Pop's, and give it to Linda Lacey, not with him facing sure death. Something else he said too, about the tunnel mouth, and where to find it. As if I didn't know. But Judd Lacey'd have to die a-bawling orders at somebody. I legged it up the trail.

I never hated anything so bad in my whole life, running out on a man like that, but them was his orders. He was brave, nobody could deny that. The picture of him standing there, looking up, with not a sign of scare on his face went with me. Mean or what not, there was a man.

My side still hurt like blazes, but I tried not to notice. I was after Quinn Kimball. I'd hide just inside the tunnel, then as soon as things cooled off, I'd duck out and hit for Paydirt and the sheriff. And I'd see that Drussie got her full share of what Pop, God rest his bones, had dug out. But I'd see that Judd's widow got her share, too. That was only right.

I could feel the heat now, and it sent shivers chasing down my spine. I humped myself faster, with the fire leaping along, hungry like, not three hundred yards behind. The heat was singeing my hair when I dived into that tunnel. I flopped down, safe, but so all done that I didn't care what happened. When I heard Quinn Kimball's nasty-mean voice, I didn't even look up.

"So you made it," he said. "And without your partner. Now I can pin Pop's passin' on you, after all."

So there I was, right back to taw, and no better off than when I started. And Judd Lacey burned to a cinder down in Coldwater. Alive, Judd would have finished Quinn Kimball off, even if he did keep all of Pop's gold. That was better than Quinn getting it. And there was

Linda, unprotected, to think of, too.

"I thought Judd might make it," Quinn went on. "So I rigged up a little surprise for him, just in case."

He laughed, that cruel, thin laugh of his, and nodded to a insulated line strung along the tunnel. "Got a charge of dynamite planted up front, and the switch right here at hand. If he should stagger in, down would come the whole mountain on him."

"He'll not come," I said, bitter. "Your trap, down in Coldwater—there won't even be any bones left."

He busted loose with an exclamation. He was staring down the tunnel. There come a figger, staggering in. Judd Lacey! I jumped for Quinn, but my old legs was too slow. He grabbed up the switch even as I grabbed him. The roar and the force of the blast knocked us fully forty feet.

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QUINN was up first, and before I knowed it I felt a gun poked into my back. A minute later he had a lantern lighted and was herding me down the tunnel. I was pretty groggy, but I could still think. I wondered where he was taking me, and how we was going to get out. There wasn't any outlet that I knew of, except the one he'd closed, burying Judd. Poor Judd. He likely never knowed what hit him.

We come to a side shaft, and Quinn herded me into it. Another turn, and the shaft widened, and there was Pop Mason, bound hand and foot, and glaring at Quinn like he was some trapped animal, which I guess he about was.

"I brought you a partner," Quinn said, giving the poor old fellow a kick. "Get up and take a look at him. You and him are goin' to fight a duel. Swampy'll bash your head in with a shovel, but you'll get sweet revenge, you'll shoot him before you die. Then you'll write how he

tried to rob you, and how you are leaving the mine to me for caring for you."

"Quinn Kimball, you'll rot in hell for this," Pop said thickly. He probably hadn't had any water for days.

"But I'll have a grand time while I'm livin'," Quinn answered. "The gold you found will be a big help."

When Pop slumped back down, Quinn laughed and kicked him again. He just wasn't human. He turned to me

"You get that shovel," he said, "and start diggin'. There at the end of the tunnel." He backed the order up with a flourish of his gun.

I dug. The ground wasn't hard. I dug out jars, and they were filled with gold. I could see the yellow shine in the lantern light. There was plenty for Drussie Dorgan and Linda, both, except that Quinn Kimball was grabbing the whole batch.

When I had 'em all dug out, Quinn gave a satisfied chuckle. You two can wait till mornin' for your big battle," he said. "I'll want to mosey as soon as you kill each other, and it's pretty hot outside, right now. We'll all have a good night's sleep. Nothin' like rest when you've got a hard fight ahead of you, one that's sure to turn out fatal."

Hours later Quinn roused and looked at his watch. "It's mornin' outside," he said. "Swampy, I'll give you a look at how clever Pop was at hidin' the new shaft into his mine."

He slapped Pop around some when Pop told him what sort of polecat he was, and started me down the tunnel ahead of him. We come to a big wooden door and he undid the heavy bar that held it shut. "This takes us right into Pop's cabin," he said. "He was even dumpin' the tailin's into the gulch that runs under a corner of his shack. I never tumbled till I hid up in his loft and watched."

He swung the door back and shoved me through, him right behind. I blinked

in the bright sunlight, which was all around. Then I heard a hoarse bellow, a rush, and the smack of two bodies coming together. When I got my eyes fixed to see in natural sunshine, there was Quinn, on the ground and squalling bloody murder, and somebody—by hunky, it was Judd Lacey—walloping the ground with him. Judd mauled him and kept on mauling him till he stopped yelling and went all limp and quiet.

"Got to save enough for hangin'," Judd growled then, and stopped and motioned to a couple of forest rangers who stood looking on.

"It was a nice job," one of them said. "And it needed doing. And neither one of us saw it."

"But—but" That was all I could say.

"You thought I was burned up," Judd said. "I took off my pants, threw 'em over that limb, and h'isted myself out. Pants are mighty useful to a man. Then, when Quinn tried to bury me, he hurried too much. I wasn't far enough in and the blast squished me clean out of the tunnel."

"And you was too tough for the fire to burn," I said. "You just spit on it and put it out."

"I told you Quinn's mine was there, close by, when you was draggin' up the trail from Coldwater. It was shallow, but deep enough. I stayed in it till the fire'd burned itself out. Then I come around on this side to see how Pop's cabin had fared, and to hunt for the other tunnel, the one Quinn had to leave.

He stopped, looked around at the ashes, and laughed. A big belly laugh, loud even for Judd Lacey. "That fire, it was

a beauty," he bellowed. "Only it back-fired on our friend here."

He yanked Quinn to his feet and shook him to consciousness. "Look around, you, sidewinder," he ordered. "Look what your cute little fire done. Burned away Pop's shack and left the door to his tunnel exposed. I might never o' found it, otherwise."

"Unloose me," I said, "and let's go get Pop. He's been tied up for days."

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LISTEN, I said later, when we'd rubbed and worked on Pop till he was able to move again, and when I was sure the rangers were close enough to hear. I wanted witnesses. I was aiming to save Pop a part of his mine.

"Pop told me," I said, "about you grubstaking him, and—"

Judd let out a roar and reached for me, and he shook me while he talked. "Listen, you!" he yelled. "You ain't payin' no notice to what that crazy old prospector told you. He never was responsible. He's even less now."

"But he said—" I started, but didn't get any further. Judd shook me till my false teeth rattled.

"I don't give a whoopin' damn what he said," he told me. "I didn't grubstake that danged old fool, not a solitary nickel's worth. He paid his own cash for every bean that went into his ornery wrinkled hide. It's his mine, and don't anybody try tellin' any different."

And that's the way it stood. For a mean man, Judd Lacey would do the queerest things.



SIXGUN MINSTREL MAN

By Daniel
Youngs



The fugitive, firing all the while, spurred his horse viciously along the road.

Snort Brenham fought personal battles with sixguns, but when a two-bit trickster sought to win a cowtown with back-stabbing election hocus-pocus, Snort went to work with his wits — and a deadly mandolin!

THE diminutive rider of the big black checked from trail trot to a slow walk as his horse pricked ears forward inquiringly. The little gent had been strumming a mandolin. He threw it to his back on a rawhide thong, while his ungloved hand rested near a lean thigh, ready for action.

The rough trail, so long enclosed by

cutbanks, abruptly gave way to open road, bordered by mesquite and clusters of spiny pear cactus.

"Shore a hell of a place to be caught," Snort Brenham muttered, looking keenly ahead at the Texas dust disturbed by an oncoming rider a mile or so away.

Cautiously he kned the black away from the cutbanks to where a clump of

brush offered some concealment. Range-trained eyes watched the approaching rider, saw the easy saddle sway and noted the tied thong which kept holsters tight to the thigh.

"Shucks, hawss, it's only one," he thought out loud, and reined out into the road. As the stranger approached his hand dropped to a gun butt, but Snort already had his hogleg in hand.

"Easy, waddy," Snort cautioned serenely. "As yuh was!"

In a quick glance the oncomer took in Snort's ensemble. Saw the five-foot-four figure, noted the worn holster and polished guns, gave a fleeting look of admiration at the big black, then saw the mandolin—and snorted derisively.

"Howdy, bub," he chortled. "Ain't yuh pretty small tuh be forkin' that hawss? Yuh sorta look like a fly on a quarter of beef."

Brenham flushed, for ever since he had forked a bronc among men, his small size had been a continual torment.

"Yeah, mebbe I am," he answered languidly, eyeing the large, curved nose of his questioner. "Ef'n that was a dead cow yuh're ridin' I'd a took yuh for some kinda buzzard."

The stranger at once got the implication.

"You're pretty fresh for a squirt," he growled. "Mebbe I'll hafta learn yuh some manners."

"Me, I'm open to learn lotsa things," Snort drawled. "But I aims to choose my own schoolmarms: But—ef'n yuh wants school to start right now"—his voice snapped like a quirt—"jest ring yore bell!"

Snort's tense attitude made the stranger pause. Carelessly he loosened his right foot from oxbow, stretched as though to limber tired muscles, then, like the snap of a snake, his hand flashed to holster.

Grinning, Snort had edged his mandolin around within reach, and as the strang-

er moved, the mandolin gave forth a realistic imitation of the warning of a rattler ready to strike.

Rearing high, whirling, the stranger's horse tore the off-balanced man from the kak and somersaulted him into the middle of a clump of cactus. Snort's laugh mingled with wild oaths as the man tried furiously to remove thorns from inside open parts of his goatskin chaps.

The scared horse tore down the trail in a cloud of dust, going somewhere as if he were late. For an instant the man, livid with rage, faced Snort, but immediately controlled himself. Snort realized then that he had made no weak enemy.

"Listen, squirt," the man mouthed without trace of anger, "yuh ain't the first grubline rider who's crossed my range. But most of them have stayed here, helpin' grow grass for my spread. I aim to fatten one heifer on grass above yore grave. It won't be dug very deep. It don't pay to cross Jim Cole."

"Ef'n that's the first lesson in that school of yores, Cole, look out the scholar don't make the teacher learn another lesson. Yuh've already had one." Spurring his horse, Snort cantered down the road.

He pushed on until he saw a conglomeration of dust, buildings, loading pens and the languid life of a cowtown at rest. The black whickered gratefully as Snort lightly watered him, then rubbed him down as he demolished a quart of oats. Only after this did Snort thrust his own head into a watering trough. Refreshed, he turned toward the liveryman, who spoke with the laconic utterance of the oldtime range dweller.

"Fust time hyah, stranger?"

Snort smiled assent. "What's this here metropolis called?" he asked carelessly.

"She's shore been called aplenty, but her official name is Santora, county seat of Socorro County."

"What's all these posters?" Snort asked, seeing all available space filled with plac-

ards. "Rewards, or is a circus comin' to town?"

Without waiting for an answer he crossed over to a wall to read them. The first was:

WOLF WILSON FOR SHERIFF.
WHITE MAN'S RANGE FOR
WHITE MEN.

P. S. ANY ONE KETCHED TEARING DOWN
OR MARKING THIS SIGN WILL BE SENT
TO HELL PRONTO!

WOLF WILSON

Snort turned to the next sign, and he read:

PABLO PANCHECO FOR SHERIFF.
NESTER'S ENEMY.
KEEP OUR BEEF FOR OUR-
SELVES.
VOTE FOR PABLO.

"'Pears like excitement in town," grinned Snort.

"Hell's shore poppin'! Big Jim Cole's backin' the Mex, an' the small ranchers are for Wolf. But chances are Wolf won't be hyah when the votes is finally counted."

"How come a greaser can run ag'in a white man?" Snort inquired curiously.

"Him bein' backed by Big Jim gives him a edge. Yuh see, Cole owns about the whole range an' runs a greaser spread. At least he ain't got no white men workin' fer him. They say he wouldn't even—" He stopped suddenly.

"Reckon I've got th' hoof an' mouth disease ag'in," he quavered. "Fergit it, won't yuh, stranger?"

Snort's face creased with a friend-making smile. "Shucks, pardner, what comes in my ears don't never come outa my mouth. See yuh later," and he wandered off, with his mandolin swinging from its thong.

B RIGHT lights, night glamor, shrill laughter from long hardened throats; blatant uproar from tinny piano; click of chip against chips; hum of conversation. All these familiar sounds drew Snort to the doors of the Little Gold Dollar.

Before opening the swing doors Snort paused to take in a deep breath of Texas night air and look at the star-lit Texas sky. Then, an instinctive touch of leather, a slight lifting of ivory-handled guns, and he pushed the batwings open. Caution, habitual and ingrained, made him step swiftly to one side as the doors swung to behind him. A loud guffaw broke the silence of his entrance.

"Look what's here, fellers!" a rough voice jeered. "School kid packin' man-sized guns and"—his voice rose in simulated horror—"a damn music box!"

With little apparent interest Snort barely gazed at him, seeing an unshaven breed who evidently had patronized the bar too well. Walking to the bar, Snort swung his back against it and hooked a heel on the bar rail. Then, lifting his mandolin, he struck a sweeping chord.

"L— U— A— L—" he sang lingeringly.

A range-wrinkled old cownurse broke the silence and his voice held no jest. "What the heck does that-all mean, stranger?"

"Do I hafta interpret," smiled Snort. "It jest means, line up and liquor."

The slow crowding up to the bar showed Snort his invitation meant no more than a desire to get better acquainted. He drank with the rest and shoved back the change.

"Keep that for some waddy who's broke an' needs a shot," he instructed the bar-keeper.

"Me, I take care of them kind m'self," refused the spit-curled bartender. "But yuh got something yuh can match me for."

"What yuh mean?" Snort asked.

"Jest this. Yuh've got a music box. Sing a song and ef'n it's good, I'll buy the next two drinks. Ef'n, accordin' to public sentiment, it's sorta spavined, yuh buy them. But—ef'n it ain't too personal, an' we-all ain't choosey, yuh might tell us who yuh air."

Snort grinned in reply and lifted his mandolin, strumming thoughtfully. Then his voice silenced the crowd as he sang:

"The question yuh ask me has shore made me think,

"I like yuh, bartender, and shore liked yore drink.

"But me, I'm a waddy that shore likes to roam,

"Wherever there's trouble, that spot is my home.

"A crowd I once met with they gave me a name,

"They called me Song Shooter, I'm proud of the same,

"I've got me three pals which has saved many lives,

"My big hawss Black Ben an' my twin forty-fives."

As the echoes ended in regretful silence, stamping of boots, shouts of pleasure and offers of drinks showed Snort how much they enjoyed this break from their usual routine.

"Wet yore throat and sing us some of the old ones," the grizzled cowman shouted. "Old Sam Bass, *The Lone Prairie*, *Chisum Trail*. Any of the old ones!"

Snort jumped on the bar, facing his audience, and greeted them with a happy grin. He seemed thoroughly at ease, yet some of the wiser ones noted his mandolin was never far away from his lowhung holster.

He sang songs of the range, songs of the lonely life of the cowmen, songs heard in honkatonks after payday.

He jumped to the floor as the doors crashed open and Big Jim Cole roughly pushed his way to the bar. Without words the barkeep placed bottle and glass in front of him. Ignoring the glass, Cole

drank greedily from the bottle. His fingers frequently explored the place of saddle galls, yet since he had been riding for forty years, observers wondered.

"Sing some more, Song Shooter," belowered a puncher, so Snort's fingers again swept the strings. At the sound, big Jim turned swiftly, eyes narrowed and face scowling.

"Gents, this here rendition will be called *The Rattler*," and he broke into full-voiced song.

"A eight inch rise from a five foot coil,

"A puff o' dust from the sun-baked soil,

"Then castanets from a wavin' tail,

"While a scared cayuse rushes down the trail.

"A half-baked rider goin' through the air,

"A clump of cactus which was growin' there,

"A cussin' cowman in a ragtime dance,

"With cactus needles stuck in his pants.

"Oh, some can ride an' some can fall,

"But them cactus needles, why they itches all!"

At last the observers knew why big Jim's fingers made frequent search of his hide. The laugh which followed was a rather scared kind of mirth. Snort realized its content—glee, perhaps a touch of contempt, but above all, fear!

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COLE'S lips spread apart in a dog-like snarl and his quivering hand above gun butt foretold instant action. Snort picked up his glass and leisurely drained it. Then, eyes flickering with amusement, he again faced Cole.

"Somethin' itchin' yuh, Cole?"

Big Jim took a deep swallow of nothing and regained his calm. As his eyes swept over the crowd, two beetle-browed hombres, a Mex and a breed, left their places and ranged themselves alongside him, standing back so as to not interfere with Cole's gunarm. Then Cole faced Snort.

"Nothin's itchin' me, flea," he said coldly. "Not even a loco minstrel tryin' to show off."

Warily the crowd separated in two groups, none in line with Snort or Big Jim. All except that grizzled cowman who had asked Snort to sing. Slowly, so the movement could not be mistaken, Snort lifted his mandolin and again broke into song.

*"Old King Cole had a ace in the hole,
"Whenever he reached for his pole,
"But his ace proved a knave and was soon
in his grave,
"Whilst Cole sold the cows he had stole!"*

As he ended, Snort's hand dropped to his side, still holding the mandolin by its neck. Defiantly he had thrown the gauntlet to Big Jim.

Like the flick of a lizard's tongue after a fly, Cole's hand flashed downward, tensed, prehensile fingers closing as they met gun butt. Yet speed in the draw does not always mean a quick end of a ruckus, as many in Boothill could testify.

Snort knew that from his position he had no chance against Cole's draw. He whirled sidewise, the first bullet burying itself in the front of the bar. Then he swung his mandolin viciously sidewise, its bowl striking Big Jim's elbow with nerve shattering force. Closed fingers opened, gun dropping from nerveless fingers while Cole rubbed his right elbow with his left hand. Forgotten was his urge to salivate Snort!

Like the flea Cole had called him, Snort jumped backward, landing in a crouch with his sixgun in each unwavering hand. In a fraction of a second, they spoke thunderingly, and the Mex who sided Cole sent a bullet in the ceiling as he caved at the knees and crashed to the floor, out of the game forever.

Snort's guns half-circled from side to side at the crowd he was facing, knowing that even though they had enjoyed his

singing, some there might put it to a full stop, with lead.

Classes had again been called in Big Jim's school and the second lesson was nearly over. Yet Snort knew that the recess would be but a short one. Some looked at Snort with admiration, yet it was tinged with pity. They knew he had no chance against this stacked deck.

"Beat it quick, yuh little hellion," a voice growled in Snort's ear. "I'll keep 'em off yuh till yuh get to yore cayuse. Get the hell outa here afore they gun yuh! Damn little fool, startin' the dance before the orchestra arrives. But me—Wolf Wilson—is backin' yore play!"

Beside him, with hawleg in each hand, Snort saw that old veteran of the range who had first asked him to sing. He also saw other men edging toward Big Jim, awaiting a word. But Cole was still interested in his crazy-bone.

A quick appraisal of his new friend gave Snort confidence. So, leathering his guns, he picked up his mandolin. A sounding chord brought him the attention of all.

"Gents," he said earnestly, "reckon I'll hafta leave this metropolis for a day or two, but I'll shore be back for election."

"Air yuh a range dick?" asked a curious puncher.

"Hell, no, I ain't no detective. But I'm shore as hell against range grabbers and white men who run greaser spreads in a white country. I drift into this range to find it's wanted by a hawg, and I reckon I'll stay here till we make lard outa that particular porker."

Beside him Wolf Wilson still held the crowd motionless beneath the menace of his guns. "Get the hell outa here, feller," he growled again. "Go out to my spread an' I'll be seein' yuh."

Snort saw some men nod approvingly while others glared menacingly. He knew in a few minutes all hell would break loose and he would be on the hot end of the

pitchfork. But he had to make one last jibe, so he sang:

*"It's strange that a range where white men
ride*

*"Should be ruled by a skunk in a white
man's hide,*

*"Or that half-breed Mex with their loops
can vex*

*"The white men's spreads 'till they shore
are wrecks."*

A half strangled cry broke from Big Jim as Snort backed to the door. "Get him," he mouthed, but Wilson stood between, and all knew he could and would shoot.

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WITH back pressed against the swing doors Snort paused for a last look. Behind and over the heads of the crowd he saw a gaudily dressed Mex standing on a chair, hand in the air. Instinctively Snort ducked, and a flash in the air was followed by the quivering of the door as an eight-inch knife buried its blade.

A quick waist-high blast of Snort's left gun sent back answer, and as he passed outside he had a glimpse of the Mex wavering curiously on the chair, then crashing to the floor.

Through the deepest shadows he could find, Snort hurried to the feed barn and quickly saddled under the watchful eyes of the proprietor.

"'Pears like yuh ain't makin' much of a stay," he remarked slowly.

"No," Snort laughed, "Big Jim don't like me."

"Which-all is shore a compliment. Got all yuh need?"

"All but information. Where's Wolf Wilson's spread?"

"East, about twenty mile. Mark's the Flyin' W. Wolf's a good man to tie to," he added as Snort rode away.

In the small hours of the morning Snort reached a lane leading to a cluster of buildings a quarter of a mile away.

With a sigh he opened the gate and led the black through. Between there and the house he saw a clump of small live oaks, which offered some shelter. He'd wait there until the crew roused at dawn.

Slowly he hobbled the black and stretched out under the trees for a couple of hours slumber.

Still muzzled by the halter of sleep he awoke suddenly, listening to sounds which broke the night's silence. He heard the thuds of a hard-ridden horse, and the snap of a sixgun replying to the sharper sound of Winchesters. Must be a half dozen of them, he thought.

Quickly he saddled the black, rubbed a hand across sleepy eyes and loosened the guns in their holsters. Then he rode through the shadows toward the uproar.

The fugitive, firing all the while, spurred his horse viciously along the narrow road between the gate and dim house. Flashes of light in the bunkhouse showed the punchers were awake, wondering what it was all about.

Snort wondered who the fugitive was. He must find Wolf, but this man needed help. Six against one—rifles against one sixgun. Well, he'd better make it two to six!

A bare hundred yards separated the hare and hounds. Even as he looked the horse faltered in his stride, shook a bewildered head and fell to his knees. The rider leaped to the far side, seeking what cover the fallen steed might give.

Snort's sixguns broke into action.

Methodically, not wasting a shell, Snort poured lead into the massed group. Two saddles were emptied and fear-crazed horses, made unmanageable by the noise and scent of blood, trampled the fallen.

The gateway became a vortex of muddled milling men and horses, all trying to escape through that small opening.

Snort fired once more, this time over their heads as a warning, increasing the furor. At last the funnel disgorged its contents and Snort turned to the limping man.

The pale light of dawn was giving way to sunrise, and as the sun spread its fingers over the scene, Snort recognized the old cowman who had sided him in town—Wolf Wilson.

"Yuh the ranny that sided me?" Wolf growled.

"What do you think?" replied Snort shortly, somewhat peeved at the apparent lack of gratitude. "Yo're on yore feet, ain't yuh?"

"I would'nt be ef'n it wasn't fer yuh. Much obliged, hombre. I shore owe yuh somethin'."

"It's even-Steven," Snort laughed. "What about yore sidin' me in town?"

A reluctant grin spread over a face not used to smiling. "Reckon both our hands are clean now, young feller," he admitted.

Both turned as a harsh voice bellowed. "Spread out, yuh damn fools. Five yards apart. Then we kin find what it's all about."

Wolf straightened up with a sigh of relief. "That's my gang, Singer. Lissen to old Pecos Pete beller!"

A shout from Wolf brought the punchers to them, looking for damage, but though Wolf had a couple of scratches none was hurt. A few words explained.

"Big Jim's bunch jumped me when I left the saloon. My horse wasn't where I'd left him. Someone moved him down the street a piece. But I rid like hell and got away. Ef'n it hadn't been fer this young feller I wouldn't have got further. This is—what the hell's yore name anyway, boy?"

"They call me Snort Brenham."

"An' this is my bunch, Snort. Now, ef'n yuh ain't too proud, yo're one of them."

Snort smiled a friendly smile. "Glad to be, Wolf, at least fer awhile. Mebbe after

election I'll want to see what makes a tumbleweed go along; when yore sittin' in the sheriff's chair with a big tin badge hidin' yore vest pocket."

"'Fraid that won't happen," Wolf answered gloomily. "Big Jim's got the whole damn county sewed up, looks like. But I'm ridin' her 'till the last whirl! She may throw me, but I'll ride till I'm plumb incapacitated. But anyways, what the hell are we standin' here for? Let's eat."

After a hearty cursing of the cook and a hastily prepared breakfast, all sat down on the porch for a waw-waw.

"Best thing to do is to give every man a Winchester an' go shoot up Big Jim an' his greasers," offered Pecos Pete.

"Don't agree," Snort said seriously. "Election's day after tomorrow an' votes is what counts—that is if they're rightly counted. Why not send yore rannies out today to see the scattered ranchers and try for votes? Then meet here again tonight."

"Damn shame when a honest cowman hasta nurse his spread 'cause he's afraid of a greaser outfit," Wolf said. "Me, I don't like it."

"Yuh'd like it less ef'n yuh came home to find yore place a pile of white ashes."

"Reckon yo're right, Snort, but I can't pin much hope on them scattered spreads. Prob'ly most of them won't come in to vote."

But Wolf picked out most of his bunch and sent them off on an electioneering tour. He, Snort and Pecos Pete remained to watch the spread.

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MEANTIME, Big Jim Cole was also having his personal troubles. Wilson's strength had surprised and angered him. But if he was to boss the county, Wolf would have to be beaten.

"What's the next step, boss?" asked Panchecho, his segundo. "Do we gun that hombre now?"

"Yuh damn fool," Cole retorted angrily, "ef'n it wasn't for my head yuh'd all be stretchin' maguey. Of course yuh don't gun him 'till after election's over. I'm callin' a truce till then."

"Yuh're what?"

"Jest that. And I'll tell yuh-all right now, if any of yuh pull a gun to even shoot a boogered steer I'll see that yore boots are on when yuh're planted in Boothill. Where the hell's that damn Dutchman who calls himself a carpenter?"

Fat thighs quivering beneath far fatter belly, the old Dutchman was dragged before him. Eyes buried in flaccid fat looked at Cole in abject fear.

"Come here," Cole rasped. "The rest of yuh keep away."

Five minutes talk ended with the

Dutchman waddling away, intent on what Big Jim had told him. "I want all of yuh to keep away from Dutchy tonight and tomorrow," he ordered. "Then, on election day, all be ready at daybreak."

Cole chose a fresh horse and rode rapidly to Santora. After making certain contacts he entered the Little Gold Dollar where he knew he would find men who favored Wilson, as well as some of his own adherents. Greeting all cordially, he bought the house a drink.

"Fellows, this here's the first election ever held here," he said at last. "How do we go about it?"

"What do you mean, go about it?" asked Bud Ferris. "We just vote, don't we?"

"Shore, but we gotta have a place to vote and a good tight ballot box which can't be opened till the last vote's in."

This aspect had not occurred to his listeners. They scratched their heads.



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"Hell, just get a wood box from the storekeeper," one suggested. "Long's we keep the cover on, I reckon it'll be okay."

"That wouldn't be right. I'll tell yuh," Cole said, with the appearance of deep thought. "I've got a old stove-in Dutchman at my place yuh-all know and he's a whiz at carpenter work. How about me havin' him make a good tight ballot box?"

All hands agreed, and the saloon proprietor offered the use of his large back room as a voting place, knowing much additional trade would fall into his hands that day. And Cole insisted that on election day no guns would be permitted in the voting place. They could be checked with the barkeeper.

"We ain't goin' to have no ruckus that day," he said strongly. "This election's goin' to be fair an' square. And furthermore I'm declarin' gun-truce with Wolf Wilson and his spread, 'cept that little flea they call the Song Shooter."

Word of the gun-truce was relayed to Wolf, Snort and Pete by the cowman named Ferris. All three looked at him somewhat skeptically.

"What do yuh think, Bud?" Wolf asked at last.

"I think he means it, Wolf. You see, there's many a vote he might lose if he started anything now. But when the votes are counted, look out!"

"My sentiments, too," put in Snort thoughtfully. "But our boys are ridin' from hell to breakfast today and don't know about this here truce. An' so far's I know, they ain't none of them left their hardware in the bunkhouse."

"I don't reckon any of them will start anything, less'n Cole does," Wolf replied moodily. "But I know danged well he's up to some trick."

Late in the day the boys came straggling in with word that most of the ranchers seemed to be for Wolf, but there were

a few outspoken for Cole. These were thought to have herds growing faster than the rules of nature permitted.

"But don't forget, Song Shooter, that Cole specifically excepted you from the truce," Ferris said. The bunch looked at Snort without apparent emotion yet one could have noticed a certain tension. Snort's fight was their fight! Wolf looked like a steer with his nose in the dirt at the end of a lass rope.

"Then there ain't no damn truce," he exploded. "Snort's one of the bunch and we-all play his game. Reckon we'd better gang up and wipe out Big Jim or get wiped out. To hell with the damn election!"

Without words Snort picked up his mandolin and began to sing.

"There was a mangy coyote a walkin' rather slow,

"Who met a little calf who had no other place t' go.

"He said 'That bunch o' willows over there looks mighty green,

"What do yuh say we takes a walk an' overlooks th' scene?"

"The calf was sorta skeerful, but th' tricky coyote said,

"No use in stayin' here with sun a-shinin' on yore head.

"Fer me yore Ma ain't got no use, but let us two declare a truce,"

"So they went into th' willers where th' coyote played th' deuce!"

There was thoughtful silence when Snort ended and Pecos Pete, segundo, broke the gravity.

"Snort's right, boss. Yuh cain't never make nothin' outa a coyote's hide but jest plain coyote. But me—I rises on my hind laigs and states I'm backin' our pard Snort!"

"Thanks, Pecos," Snort answered slowly. "But me, I ain't aimin' to let this spread get wiped out 'cause of me. Big Jim wants this range an' thinks he's goin' to get it, that's all."

"Well, reckon we'd better lay low

'till election," Wolf decided. "We'll all go in then an' ef'n Cole's men check their hawglegs, we'll hafta too. But I aim to keep my eye on a good strong chairleg."

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ALTHOUGH THE VOTING did not start until seven, by daybreak the streets of Santora were crowded, while space at the tie racks was at a premium. The feed barn did a rushing business.

Aside from scowls when they met, neither side attempted any violence. All knew the time for that might come after votes were counted. Each side had a chosen man just inside the door whose monotonous chant, "Come on gents, check yore hardware," met no refusal.

Only one incident occurred to mar the peace. As a breed from Cole's spread turned away, after handing in his gun, old Pecos Pete noticed the outline of a sheath between his shoulders.

"Come on, breed," he growled, "hand in that cuchillo."

The breed scowled. "Me, señor, I have nothing. You have all my weapons."

"Hey, Cole," Pecos bellowed as he saw Big Jim passing. "This breed of yores packs a throwing cuchillo and won't turn it in. Is this the way yuh play square?"

Questioning eyes looked to see how Cole would take it. For an instant he paused, then leaped for the breed, large hand grasping a scared throat. His right hand explored a second, then ripped the shirt from the breed's back, tearing loose an eight-inch knife. He handed it over.

"Here's how square I play, hombre," he grated. Straightening the breed up with left hand, his right fist struck square in the face with a noise like the splat of a cow pulling her hoof out of the mud. Blood spurted from the smashed face.

Again and again he struck the half-

conscious man until the face was a gory pulpy mass. Then lifting the dazed breed from the floor, he carried him to the entrance and with a heave of massive shoulders threw him through the swing doors so hard that one of the doors splintered from its hinges.

"Have that door fixed and charge it to me, Art," he said calmly. "When I tell a man of mine anything, I'm goin' to be obeyed," and he turned away.

Snort, mandolin in hand and guns on hip, walked up and down the street. Once he met Big Jim face to face.

"Got that heifer ready for fattenin' yet Cole?" he asked impudently.

With an effort Big Jim controlled himself. "I'll be seein' yuh tonight, flea. After that yuh'll jest be some more fertilizer," and he passed on without looking back.

The voting was orderly. Bill Prescott, storekeeper, and Lon Lewis, stage owner, had been chosen to handle it and both were known as hard men. Also the fact that each had a loaded scatter-gun beside his chair had something to do with it.

When time for the count arrived, the box was placed high on a table for all to see. It was about eighteen inches square by two feet high, with straps of one inch band iron running ten inches from the bottom up and over the top. Prescott scratched his head dubiously.

"How the heck do we open it?" he asked.

Curious eyes turned to Big Jim.

"Well, dawg my cats," he ejaculated. "I was so serious to see it was strong I plumb forgot about openin' it."

"Get a ax," someone suggested.

"No, we don't want to break it," Prescott replied. "Mebbe"—and he again inspected the box—"mebbe we can knock the bottom off where those iron straps don't go."

Snort and Wolf exchanged glances. "I

shore smell skunk," Snort whispered. "Why didn't those straps go all way around?"

"Well, the votin's over, boys. Let's get dressed," Wolf told his crew and they went to the front, where they secured their guns. Noting this, Cole and his adherents did likewise, each side warily watching the other.

The barkeep brought a small hatchet and Prescott carefully pried loose the bottom of the box.

"Fellers," Prescott hollered, "yuh chose us to run this election. Now all of yuh keep away till we finish the count."

The officials emptied the slips on the table, throwing the box to the floor beside them. Slowly Lewis opened the first ballot.

"One for Wilson," he chanted. "One for Pablo. Another for Pablo. And another."

The monotonous chant went on, but after the first few all knew that Pancheco was winner by at least five to one. Wolf and Snort stood tense with surprise. A low murmur swept the room.

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AT LAST Wolf spoke harshly. "Men, I ain't accusin' yuh two of puttin' anything over, but why not let one of my men an' one of Cole's count them over?"

"You accusing me?" Prescott asked, eyes narrowing.

"Not none, Bill. But this here is a surprise and it'll pertect yuh two from any suspicion."

"Suits me, Wolf," Prescott shrugged. "How about you, Cole?"

"Me, I'm willin' to take yore count, but ef'n there's bad losers here, why, count 'em over ag'in."

A man was chosen from each side and the count tallied.

"Satisfied now folks don't want a nest-

er-lover, Wilson?" Jim sneered. "Seems like they chosen me."

Snort ran a scale up and down his mandolin, his eyes still on that box. "Funny damn thing," he thought, "I know more than that voted fer Wolf."

"This ain't no honkatonk, flea," Cole said coldly. "Cut out that damn noise."

Meanwhile Prescott and Lewis had bundled up the ballots and tied them together, "Reckon we'll keep these, in case anything comes up," said Prescott.

"And that box is mine," Cole said. "I'll take it with me." He stooped over to pick it up.

Wolf looked like a wild man. He knew he had been crooked but couldn't see how. "She won't be a hell of a lot of good tuh yuh, Cole," he grated and his number ten range boot came down on the box with shattering force.

There was the sound of rending wood, and splinters squeaked as they tore loose from the iron straps. A wild yell rose up from those who stood where they could see, for amid the splintered wood peeped forth another bunch of ballots, this time those which had been cast.

Cole jumped back to his men, gun in hand, but hesitated a second whether to throw down on Snort or Wolf. He decided on Snort, but as he fired old Pecos had stepped in the line of fire, and Cole's bullet took him in the gun arm.

Snort threw a slug at Big Jim, grazing his shoulder, while Wolf jumped to one side, away from the shot Pablo Pancheco snapped at him. His gun answered and Pablo fell.

Cole snapped another shot at Snort but was swept to his knees by the falling Pablo. Wolf bounded forward just as Cole arose. With downswinging barrel, he connected with Cole's skull just above the ear, and this time Big Jim went down for good.

Then the melee was frozen into sudden rigidity by the thunderous roar of a scat-

tergun spraying pellets into the ceiling. Prescott stood on the table, calmly shoving another shell in his gun while Lewis stood beside the table, covering the crowd with his death-bringer.

"Cut it out," Prescott shouted above the din. "Leather your guns, all of you! I'm in the lookout chair and the first gun I see, its owner gets spread apart with buckshot."

Guns were slapped into holsters.

"This calls for a new deal," Prescott announced. "Stand back, and Lewis will examine that damn box."

As Lewis picked up the broken box a grin stole over his face.

"What do yuh know about that?" he laughed. "False bottom an' the votes cast ain't yet been counted." Surprised and curious glances went to where Big Jim and Pablo lay on the floor.

A hurried count was made and the results gave Wolf the lead by two to one.

Snort nearly caved in at the slap Wolf put between his shoulders.

"Want a job as deputy, Song Shooter?" Wolf asked.

Snort thought for a moment, then swung up his music box.

*"I'll hafta refuse yuh since Big Jim is dead,
"For things are too quiet around here on
yore spread."*

*"I craves me excitement so I'll ride along,
"Till I finds me another range needin' a
song!"*

"Yuh will like hell," Wolf snorted. "Gents, I'm buyin' the house tonight an' all drinks are free. Mebbe if each one o' yuh takes a separate drink with this young hellion, he'll hafta stay."

But, Big Jim's school was over and Big Jim had graduated, so next morning with a sheep-hide mouth and a song on his lips, Snort, the Song Shooter, raced the sunrise over the hill.



WAGONS AWAY!

The new serial by H. Bedford-Jones—is a rip-roaring saga of the fabulous days of the Argonauts when that bucking empire builder, the prairie schooner, was opening up the great new West; and of such men as young Morgan Wright whose heart was fired by the tales of One-eye Potts—of "gold and Injuns and the murderous Night-hawks . . ."

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FIGHTING MEN OF

CHAPTER ONE

Retired—to Boothill!

THE westbound Sunset Limited puffed along the floor of the rugged canyon and immediately began picking up speed as the weight of engine

and cars hit the down-grade. The white-haired engineer let go a derisive blast of the whistle, and the sound became a racing succession of shrill and lonely echoes as it bounced beyond the rims of the canyon and up into the blue Wyoming sky. He pulled his wind and cin-

Then he saw Ewing's sprawled figure and his high-boned face darkened with rage.



A novelette of action on the dark trails of the West

By Jay Karth

THE STEEL TRAILS

der-burned head inside the cab and shouted across to his fireman.

"Looks like these Wells-Fargo detectives are along just for the ride!" he

bawled. "Pretty soft for them boys!"

The red-faced fireman grinned while he wiped his shovel-calloused hands with a wad of greasy waste.

Wells-Fargo guard Lew Kavanagh trailed the knifeman killer of his white-haired father to the hole-in-the-wall stronghold of an owlhoot band and found that to square things for his murdered kinsman—he must shoot his best friend to death!



Then lean, brown-faced Lew Kavanagh, standing on the swaying fire-step, heard the engineer curse. The big locomotive immediately began to slow. Across the cab the red-faced fireman's hoarse voice ground out invectives.

Lew knew that some obstruction had been thrown across the tracks. He slid a Winchester from the crook of his elbow to his right hand and leaped up behind the engineer to peer out the cab window.

"Damned cows!" The engineer's voice was hoarse. "I got a mind to plough right through the whole damn herd. Stop-pin' me when I'm right on top of schedule."

But the train continued to slow . . . and finally stopped, spewing steam. From Kansas to Nevada, trainmen had strict orders to give trail herds the right-of-way. A herd on the trail today meant a train load of beef rolling East tomorrow.

Four hundred yards ahead, the herd was beginning to move across the shining ribbons of steel. It was strung out for perhaps a quarter-of-a-mile, pointing south. Back in the dust of the drags Lew saw a small remuda and several pack animals. He counted four riders, men who rode lazily, seeming to pay scant attention to the stalled Limited.

"You Wells-Fargo gents sure have it easy." The engineer had regained his good humor and was down on the fire-step, stretching aching joints.

Lew barely heard the words as he shifted his worried glance from the slow-moving herd to the brush lining the right-of-way along the side of the train. For Tom Kavanagh, Lew's dad, was three cars back, in the Wells-Fargo express car: old Tom Kavanagh, oldest express messenger in point of service on the line; who had once ridden shotgun on the gold stages out of Deadwood in the Black Hills, and who today was making his last trip before being retired.

And on this trip old Tom was carrying

the most valuable single piece of express of his entire career. Locked in the safe back there was the famous Comstock necklace—valued at more than one hundred thousand dollars. . . .

Perhaps that herd ahead was there purely by chance, but Lew knew that this high, shallow valley was a link in the Outlaw Trail that ran from Canada to Mexico. The Hole-in-the-Wall lay to the north; in the shadow of the Big Horns, while Brown's Hole nestled in the heart of the Uintah's, a scant twelve miles to the south.

This was high-line country. Cass Bentley and Quick Jaeger had their hide-outs in the south. Dude Henning and Grat Ewing and many others—the most dangerous killers in the West.

Lew dropped down to the fire-step and crossed to the opposite side of the cab, his sharp blue eyes probing the brush. But he saw only the conductor and brakeman hurrying toward the head of the train to investigate the delay. Now a Negro porter and four passengers stepped down, welcoming a chance to stretch their legs.

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PERHAPS he was a fool to worry, he thought. Hell, old Tom knew this game from hell to breakfast, and could handle a gun with the best of them. The Wells-Fargo car was locked, too, and only old Tom, Lew and Ike Moody had keys.

Ike was in the chair-car immediately behind the express car. Moody was rated the company's best man-hunter. Since the first of the year he had run three gangs to earth, and recovered the major portion of the loot stolen from Wells-Fargo cars. Lew wouldn't ask for a better pard on a job like this.

Kavanagh saw the Negro porter stop suddenly and stare at the base of the

express car door. His eyes were very wide.

Then a woman passenger, standing behind the porter, screamed—and screamed a second time. Then she promptly fainted.

Lew hit the cinder path, running, his Winchester gripped in his right fist. Blood was seeping under the door of the express car and dripping to the ground.

"Dad!" Lew cried. He pounded on the heavy side door with the barrel of his gun. "Dad!" It seemed to Lew, then, that he heard a faint scratching sound inside the car. But the door remained fast.

Lew ran along the car and leaped onto the end platform. This door, too, was locked. But Lew blasted the lock with two well-placed shots and crashed inside.

Old Tom Kavanagh lay on the floor beside the door under which his life blood seeped. His white hair was dyed with blood. He was struggling weakly to lift his body off the floor. On the other side of the car the safe door yawned wide. Lew knew, without looking, that the Comstock necklace was gone. He dropped to his knees beside his father.

"Dad!" he cried, and his soul filled with agony as he saw the awful wound in his father's right side. He knew now why he had not heard a gun shot: this wound had been made by a knife.

"Lew. . ." Old Tom Kavanagh's voice was very weak. "Where are you, son?"

Lew lifted old Tom's white head with gentle hands, let it rest on his thighs.

"Who did it, Dad?" he said in a tight voice.

"Left-handed, son. . ."

Lew realized this was so, for the knife had torn into Kavanagh's right side, with the blade ripping inward.

Kavanagh was just about gone. His voice was a whisper. Lew leaned closer.

"Promise—me, son . . . you'll get the—necklace—back. . ."

"I promise, Dad."

The old messenger's body stiffened in Lew's arms, then became limp. Lew knew his dad was dead. He lowered the blood-caked white head to the floor of the car, then picked up his gun and gripped the walnut butt until the backs of his fingers were white.

He felt a gentle jerk. The train was moving. He realized that the engineer had not pulled the whistle-cord for fear of stampeding the herd.

Lew stiffened. That trail herd! It had been pointed across the path of the Limited just as the Wells-Fargo car was being looted . . . while Tom Kavanagh was being knifed to death. A conviction grew in Lew's mind that the movement of that herd was tied in with the theft. He jumped to his feet and peered through the small barred window on the car's south side. The herd was moving slowly away from the right-of-way. Lew could see the four men riding through the dust thrown up by the longhorns, neckerchiefs covering nose and mouth against the dust. Not one of them paid the slightest attention to the train. Then the Limited gathered speed, carried Lew out of sight of the herd.

"Put up your hands!"

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THE voice came from the door of the express car. Lew whirled. The conductor stood just inside the car with a sawed-off shotgun gripped in shaking hands. The muzzles yawned at Lew's middle. Behind him stood a white-faced brakeman and the porter who had first seen the blood running under the door. The conductor finally recognized Lew.

"Oh, it's you, Kavanagh," he said shakily, and lowered the gun. "What in hell happened?"

"The necklace is gone," Lew said grimly. "Dad is dead," he added, as he saw the conductor staring at the body.

"Lawd-a-mercy!" That was the porter's voice. "I knowed there was a dead man in this car."

"Where's Moody?" Lew asked.

"Ain't seen him," the brakeman said. "I'll look." He disappeared toward the chair-car.

"What's the next station?" Lew looked at the conductor.

The man automatically looked at his watch.

"Sandstone Gap," he said. "It's ten miles west—"

"I got to get off there," Lew said, "stop the train." He turned toward the front of the car. His saddle rigging lay up there in a grain sack. He would pick up a mount in Sandstone Gap.

The brakeman came running back into the car. "Moody," he cried, panting hard, "ain't on the train!"

CHAPTER TWO

Enemy Camp

FOUR hours later, with the long, slanting rays of the afternoon sun warm against his right shoulder, Lew rode a rangy grulla horse along the trail left by the sharp hoofs of the herd he sought. That the cattle had been rustled, Lew had little doubt, for no owner of a legitimate brand would trail them through this broken Outlaw Trail country.

The conviction continued to grow in Lew's mind that the critters had been thrown across the path of the Limited to divert attention from the express car and to allow Kavanagh's killer to escape from the rear of the train. This could be done, Lew reasoned, what with some passengers on the ground, and others watching the excitement up ahead from the car windows. The only obstacle in the murderer's path was Moody—and Ike had disappeared.

Lew found the herd just as the sun dropped behind the rugged badlands country to the west. The outfit had made camp beside a small creek, and the stock was milling at the bed ground a few hundred yards east. There were still only four men with the outfit. Two were moving about the fire while a single rider was quartering in from the herd. One man remained at the bed ground, riding circle.

Lew rode up to the fire and sent a sharp glance at the two men who stood watching him through cautious eyes.

"Howdy, friends," he said slowly.

One man took three steps toward Lew, stopped and stood on wide-spread legs, his thumbs hooked over his gunbelt. Lew saw heavy black hair covering the backs of his hands, and a black and unruly mop jutting from under his flop-brim Stetson.

"Where you ridin'?" The black-haired man watched Lew through narrowed lids.

"I was headin' for the Hole," Lew replied, grinning. "That's where a man usually rides when he's on this trail, ain't it?" He placed both hands on his saddlehorn, a significant gesture. "I was sort of hopin' I might light down and have a bait of grub before ridin' on. I ain't lookin' for stray brands, if that's what's eatin' you."

The big man relaxed somewhat. His sharp black eyes studied Lew's face for a moment longer, then he nodded.

"Climb down," he grunted. "Only you better be ready to use them guns. We sort of forgot to leave a bill of sale for them critters out yonder when we choused 'em off of Rafter-H range—and we're right likely to have visitors. . . ."

Lew grinned again and shrugged. "Might be right interestin'," he said calmly, and climbed down.

When he reached the fire the big man handed him a tin cup of steaming black coffee, and motioned toward a big skillet filled with thick slabs of beef. As Lew reached for a slab of the meat he saw the

small, nervous man across the fire look off toward the herd.

"Grat's ridin' in, Cass," the little hombre said.

"I see him," Cass grunted, and continued to watch Lew's face in the flickering flames.

Grat! Cass! Lew's heart turned over. Grat Ewing and Cass Bentley—and the little man across the fire must be Quick Jaeger. These three were wanted in a half dozen states, for rustling, murder, and bank holdups. The black-eyed man was their leader. Quick Jaeger was a knife man, but he was fast with a gun, too.

And Grat Ewing! Lew cursed to himself. Grat Ewing knew Lew was a Wells-Fargo detective. He had spent two years in a Nevada Territory prison after Kavanagh had grabbed him robbing a stage. Since Ewing had escaped from prison he had been riding with Bentley's outfit.

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THE approaching rider loomed at the edge of the glow thrown out by the fire. Lew, coffee cup in one hand and a slab of beef in the other, drifted into the shadow of a big cottonwood, a dozen feet from the fire. He heard saddle-leather creak and knew that Grat was on the ground beside his mount. Then he heard the outlaw's voice, familiar to his ears even after nearly three years.

"Who's that?" Ewing's voice sounded suspicious as hell.

His face in shadow, Lew turned so that he faced the fire. He saw Grat Ewing staring at him. The outlaw started around the fire, right fist gripping the butt of his gun.

"Hell," Cass Bentley bawled, "he's all right. He's a hombre headin' for the Hole. I was figurin' mebbe we can use him on night herd and to help us push the critters on into the Hole."

Lew saw Quick Jaeger grin his approval. But he also saw Grat Ewing continue his belligerent advance and knew that this was showdown.

Without moving out of the tree shadow Lew spoke softly.

"Hello, Grat," he said, and tossed his scalding coffee straight into the outlaw's face.

"Kavanagh!" Grat Ewing snarled. "By God, I knowed—" His right hand flashed toward the butt of his holstered gun. Lew saw firelight gleam on the long barrel as the outlaw drew.

Lew's right fist flashed downward and back. He felt his Colt buck against his palm—once—twice. The slugs smashed into Grat Ewing's thick chest. Ewing coughed. His unfired gun dropped to the ground. Then he caved in and fell across the gun.

Lew saw Bentley's right hand flash holsterward. "Don't do it, Bentley!" he shouted. "I ain't wantin' trouble with you!"

Bentley's hand slowed, but Lew saw the knife flash out of Quick Jaeger's right hand and lance toward him. But he was moving swiftly to the right and the blade flashed past his left shoulder and plunged into a cottonwood trunk. Lew heard the metal's high song as the steel quivered in the wood.

The gaping muzzle of Kavanagh's Colt bore on Jaeger's middle, but he held his fire when he saw that the little man was not going to try for his gun—not now, anyhow.

"Cool off, Quick," Bentley said. "Mebbe Grat was a bit hasty."

Jaeger's tight mouth worked for a moment and his glance played over Lew's face. Then he nodded quickly. "All right," he said. "Mebbe he was."

"I reckon you better talk, stranger," Bentley suggested mildly. He was careful to hold his hands well away from his guns.

But Lew was not fooled. He knew these were two of the most dangerous men on the Outlaw Trail—these two and Dude Henning. He wondered if Dude could be the fourth member of this outfit, the rider on circle out at the bed ground. And he knew that he would soon find out, for he heard the drum of hoofs. A horse was running toward the camp from the direction of the herd. That would be the unknown member of the outfit riding in to investigate the shot. Lew's glance shifted from Bentley to Jaeger and back again.

"You better start talkin', Kavanagh," Bentley said softly. "That's Henning comin'." Bentley nodded toward Grat Ewing's sprawled figure. "And him and Grat, there, was sort of special pards. . ."

"I rode with Grat once," Lew said, "over in Nevada Territory. But I hadn't seen him since he landed in the prison over there. We quarreled over a split. . ."

Dude Henning's pony came to a stiff-legged halt just outside the circle of light, throwing a ghostly cloud of dust toward the men around the fire. Henning climbed out of the saddle and advanced toward the fire, a gun gripped in his hand.

"What in—" Then he saw Ewing's sprawled figure and his high-boned face darkened with rage. He looked from one face to the next until his glance fell on Lew.

Then Cass Bentley spoke. "Grat drew first, Dude," he said. "Put up your gun." There was unmistakable command in the leader's voice.

Slowly Dude Henning holstered his Colt. But his eyes were ugly.

Bentley bent over Ewing's body, caught him by the shoulders. He spoke to Lew.

"Get his feet, Kavanagh," he said. "We'll pack him out of sight, then plant him in the mornin'."

Later, when they had returned to the fire, he asked: "You got any objections to helpin' us push this herd on into the hole? We're short-handed since you

plugged Grat. What about it, hombre?"

Lew shook his head. "Suits me," he said—and heard Dude Henning let his breath out sharply. Lew looked around. Dude was staring into the fire, his dark face unreadable. But Quick Jaeger was watching Lew through unwinking, suspicious eyes, and the pale, colorless orbs were cold as a rattler's.

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IT WAS strange, Lew thought, as he lay sleepless in his soogans, that Bentley and Jaeger and Henning would stay with the herd if they had the necklace. Sudden fear ran through Lew: there had been four riders with the stock when it had crossed the right-of-way in front of the Sunset Limited—there were three now. If the killer of Tom Kavanagh had joined them there should be four.

The fear grew in Lew until he felt sick. What if his hunch was wrong? What if his dad's killer was still on the Limited, and had simply taken advantage of the diversion created by the stopping of the train to loot the express car?

And where was Ike Moody?

The knife Quick Jaeger had thrown at Lew had flashed out of the outlaw's right hand. The knife that had killed Tom Kavanagh had been gripped in the murderer's left hand. Lew wondered if Quick could handle a knife with his left hand as well as he did with his right. If so, and if he had the necklace, what had become of the other member of this crew?

And why had Cass Bentley sided him after he chopped down a pard of Bentley's? For that matter, why did the outlaw leader accept him as a member of the gang so readily? Lew shook his head and stared grimly up at the star-studded sky. He slid the long, slim fingers of his right hand about the butt of his Colt, warm to the touch as it lay close to his

body under the soogan. He must wait for the break . . . and he hoped fervently that it would come soon . . . for he knew that a man could not go without sleep forever. . . .

Several times Lew heard stealthy movement off in the darkness before Dude Henning rode in and wakened Quick Jaeger. He heard Jaeger, cursing sleepily, climb into the leather and ride off toward the bed ground. Dude smoked a cigarette over there across the dead ashes of the fire, and Lew felt the dark outlaw's smouldering glance pushing against him through the darkness. Then he heard Dude roll into the soogans.

Later Lew heard Jaeger riding in, and knew that it must be midnight. The nervous little man staked his horse off beyond Henning's, then turned toward Lew. Lew watched him approach, and his fingers again closed about the butt of his gun. He remembered how Jaeger's knife had flashed toward him, to hang quivering in the trunk of the cottonwood tree. And he thought of old Tom Kavanagh lying dead from a knife wound.

Jaeger came to a halt a few feet from Lew and stared down for a long minute before he spoke. Then Lew heard his voice.

"Kavanagh. Climb your night hoss!"

Lew saw Cass Bentley rise up on elbow. "Kavanagh," the outlaw leader said, and Lew knew that the man had not slept, "keep a sharp ear. That herd came from the Rafter-H outfit, two days drive north of here. They might be damn fool enough to try to get 'em back."

"Yeah," Lew said, and saw Bentley lie down again. Quick Jaeger turned away.

It was at this moment that a shout filled the night air. Then the blackness was split by jagged flashes of gun flame. Lead whined through the air. Lew heard a horse scream and go down, to thrash wildly for a moment before growing still. He saw Quick Jaeger run into the dark-

ness, but he could not tell if the little outlaw was hit or not. Dude Henning must have been asleep, for he came up off the ground, cursing wildly, only to dive back earthward as he realized that lead was tearing through the camp. Now both Henning and Jaeger were cursing steadily and their guns were flaming as they threw slugs at the flashes of the encircling riders.

Only Bentley remained silent, and Lew wondered if the outlaw leader had been killed. Then he saw that Bentley's soogans were empty, flattened against the ground. Bentley had shifted his position.

A gun hammered almost directly behind Lew. He twisted about, with his own Colt jutting from his fist. But he held his fire, for it was Cass Bentley. Somehow the man had made his way to the questionable shelter of the cottonwood trunk.

"It's Rafter-H!" Jaeger snarled, and triggered his gun again.

CHAPTER THREE

Ike Moody Returns

A MAN cried out, off in the darkness, and another cursed angrily. Lew's gun bucked against his palm, and he fired high, so that his lead would not take effect. He heard a Rafter-H man's voice.

"You damn rustlers better throw away your guns. You're finished!"

"Go to hell!" Bentley snapped, and his gun hammered twice.

"You're askin' for it," the Rafter-H man shouted.

At that moment, above the hammering of the guns, Lew heard a yell and the sound of horses crashing through the brush in the outer darkness. A shrill whistle, twice repeated, cut through the bedlam of noise.

"It's the Utah Kid!" Bentley shouted.

The Utah Kid! This must be timely aid from the outlaw stronghold in the Hole, Lew decided, for it sounded as if there were a dozen or more riders crashing through the brush out there beyond the positions of the Rafter-H men. Lew heard cries of chagrin and anger from among their ranks. Then they were up and retreating toward the north. Lew heard Cass Bentley chuckling, then, and wondered if the outlaw leader might not have had his skull creased by a flying slug. He heard Bentley's voice.

"Dude," he called softly, "you all right?"

"Yes."

"Quick!"

"Yeah, they was lousy shots—"

"Listen,"—that was Dude's voice again,—"they're takin' the herd—"

Lew felt admiration sweep over him for the Rafter-H men who had dared raid this outlaw nest so close to the Hole. Closer at hand, horses were still crashing through the brush, but the gunfire out there had died down. Only a warning shot hammered sporadically from the direction of the recaptured trail herd, a shot of warning to Cass Bentley and his gang to keep a safe distance.

"You can come in, Kid," Bentley called. He was still chuckling.

"You goin' to let them Rafter-H hombres get away with this, Cass?" Jaeger asked.

Lew heard a single horse approaching the camp as he awaited Bentley's reply to Jaeger's question. Bentley did not speak at once. Instead, Dude Henning spoke sourly.

"Hell, yes, Cass," he growled. "We been two days chousin' that bunch of stuff down here."

"If you want the feel of a rope around your neck," said Bentley flatly, "you two hombres just go right ahead and swap some more bullets with them Rafter-H

gents. There must be anyhow a dozen of them. And we're plumb lucky that the Kid could run a sleeper on 'em like he did. The only reason they ain't still out there, throwin' lead at us, is because they must of figured that all the sheriff-shy hombres in Brown's Hole was takin' a hand in the play. Hell, they're real gutty, considerin', chousin' their stuff out of here, when they're lookin' for an army to cut loose at 'em any minute."

Dawn was beginning to show on the broken eastern horizon. Lew saw the mysterious Utah Kid loom up out of the darkness. There was something familiar in the way the shadowy figure sat saddle, Lew thought. And as he waited to hear the newcomer's voice, and to catch a glimpse of his face, it came to him with something of a shock that this man must have been alone out there beyond the Rafter-H men. He must have spooked the outlaw's small remuda and sent them crashing through the brush to make it seem that many men were riding to the outlaws' aid.

Other burning thoughts lashed through Lew's mind: Bentley was willing to let the Rafter-H crew recover their cattle, while both Dude Henning and Quick Jaeger had voiced protest. Could this mean that Cass Bentley was the brain behind the looting of the Sunset Limited? And that he had not taken Dude and Quick into his confidence? Could this newcomer, the Utah Kid, be the man who had killed old Tom Kavanagh, and who had the necklace?

It was plain that Cass had expected the Kid, for he had recognized immediately that there was only one man riding in the brush beyond the Rafter-H.

If the Utah Kid was Tom's killer, what about Quick Jaeger? So engrossed was Lew with these thoughts that he relaxed vigilance for the first time since riding into this camp. When he heard the stealthy footstep behind him he did his utmost to

whirl and bring his Colt, which he still held in his right fist, into play. But he was too late.

His skull became a torture-cavity of agony as a heavy object crashed down on the back of his head. A second blow struck him, and it seemed that innumerable stars blazed a million, pain-ridden paths from the center of his brain, to crash against the wall of his skull with ever increasing force.

And then they exploded in one brilliant burst of color. . . Very faintly, far away, Lew heard a voice . . . a hate-filled voice . . . Then he knew no more.

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IT seemed to Lew that he had been hanged, and that his numb body swung in space, with all feeling centered in his head. He experienced the feeling of swinging through a soundless vacuum of velvet night for an endless interval.

Consciousness returned with a rush. He was hard-pressed to hold back a cry of agony as the full force of the pain in his head smashed against his nerve centers. He chewed on his lower lip until he tasted the warm salt of his own blood. After a time the pain eased off and he began to take stock of his surroundings.

That he was lying on a hard bunk, he knew, for the fingers of his right hand touched a rough wall, and there was a heavy soogan under him. He realized now that the sensation of swinging had been caused by actual motion: he had been packed across the back of a horse from the scene of the shoot-out.

His brain whirled, and he thought that he was going under again. But then his head cleared and he heard Dude Henning's voice.

"Quick sure buffaloed him plenty," said the outlaw. "He's been out three hours, anyhow."

So it had been Jaeger. Lew puzzled over this, wondering why Quick had not used his knife again, rather than the barrel of his Colt. A heavy boot hit the floor of the cabin. Cass Bentley spoke.

"Yeah. The damn fool, figurin' Kavanagh was one of them Rafter-H gents trailin' that rustled herd. A man's got to be sure about a thing before he ups and ties it to a snubbin' post." Lew heard movement somewhere in the room, then Cass Bentley's voice came again. "You sure, Kid, that he's an all right hombre?"

Lew stiffened. The Utah kid was in the room. Then he heard a familiar voice, and amazement opened his eyes.

"Hell, yes," the voice said. "I've knowed him for quite a spell. He's been dodgin' the law over in Nevada Territory for a long time."

The Utah Kid was Ike Moody! Lew saw him now, standing cool as you please, with his wide-shouldered back to the wall beside the door. Cass Bentley stood toward the center of the single room, while Dude Henning was hunkered down at the opposite end.

It was Henning who first noticed that Lew was conscious. "He's awake," he said.

Lew watched Ike Moody. The Wells-Fargo detective did not move his body, but simply turned his head so that he was looking at Lew while he still had the other two men in the corner of his vision.

"Hello, Kavanagh," he said easily.

"Hello, Kid," Lew replied. He hung onto his aching head while he came to a sitting position on his bunk. His right elbow brushed a hard object, and he realized with a start of surprise that he still had his .45 Colt. The weapon reposed in its holster. Then he was not a prisoner. His head whirled, but one thought stood out clearly: somehow, Ike Moody was known to Cass Bentley and Dude Henning as the Utah Kid.

"It's sure a good thing for you that

them Rafter-H jaspers decided to throw some more lead last night, because Quick was sure playin' a tattoo on your skull," Ike said.

"What do you mean?"

Bentley said, "Quick buffaloed you and was just about to plug you when them Rafter-H gents opened up on us again with their rifles. Quick got a slug through his head. He was cussin' you for a Rafter-H spy when he went down." The outlaw leader jerked his head toward Ike Moody. "Then the Utah Kid, here, got a look at your face and said you was an okay gent."

"Where are we now?" Lew asked.

"This is Cass' hide-out on Cold Springs Mountain," Dude Henning said. "Just above the Hole." Suddenly the man was vicious. "It's a good hide-out—but a man's likely to get hungry when he ain't got even a single damn beef in shootin' distance." He came erect, and the skin seemed drawn tight over the thin, high-boned cheeks as he faced Cass Bentley.

"I told you last night, Dude," said Cass Bentley, in a flat, dead voice, "that you and Quick could shag after them Rafter-H gents if you took a notion to."

"I ain't squawkin' about that," Dude gritted, "although I still figure we could of run them Rafter-H hombres clean back into the Tetons." The dark-featured man swung half around so that he faced Lew, and the glitter in his eyes changed to a hot, black flame. "My squawk is about this Kavanagh hombre. I figure if he hadn't come ridin' into camp yesterday, Grat would still be alive—Grat, and mebbe Quick, too."

CHAPTER FOUR

Trail's End

HE WENT into a slight crouch, and Lew knew that he was fanning a flame of hate inside his brain, fanning it to a killing heat fanning it fast.

"You all right, Lew?" Ike Moody called, from his position by the door.

Lew nodded, an almost imperceptible motion.

"I'm all right," he said. Even as he spoke he knew that Dude Henning could know nothing of the theft of the necklace. For Lew had a hunch that the dark-faced outlaw's bitterness was caused as much from the loss of the rustled herd of cattle as by the deaths of Grat Ewing and Quick Jaeger. And if he had any knowledge of the Comstock necklace, he would have been glad to see the Rafter-H men take the herd.

"Kavanagh's all right, Dude," Ike Moody said. "Let him be—"

Out of the corner of his eye Lew saw Cass Bentley drift over to stand beside Ike Moody. Lew's head ached steadily, but it was very clear, and he felt no weakness in his limbs. He spoke softly.

"You're askin' for it, Henning," he said. "Make your play!"

Henning's right hand flashed for his gun. Lew's own right fist went down and back in a blazing draw. The guns hammered at almost the same instant, and the sound filled the narrow confines of the room like one single, ear-drum shattering peal of thunder.

Through the climbing smoke curling out of the muzzle of his Colt Lew saw Dude Henning sway for a moment, while a look of intense surprise, then a fearful awareness of approaching death filled his eyes. Then he caved at the middle and collapsed face down on the hard earthen floor.

The silence that followed the thunder of the guns was broken by Cass Bentley, and Lew, through the ringing of his ear-drums, detected a faint new note in his voice.

"You've sure cleaned out my boys, Kavanagh," he observed grimly.

Lew was facing Bentley. Now he shrugged. "They asked for it," he said.

"I don't like it," Bentley said.

(Continued on page 106)



PISTOL PLAGUE IN DOOMTOWN



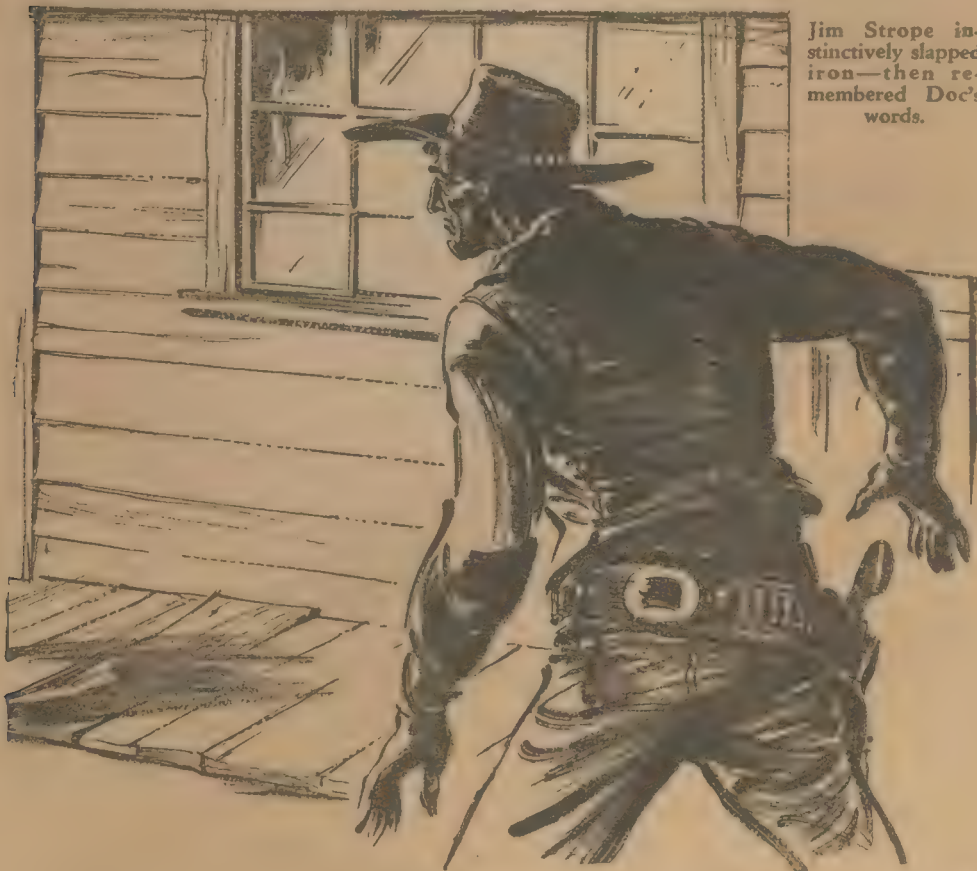
By Claude Rister

How could the feverish men and women in Doc Hollis' hospital defeat the onward march of Death when their only sawbones had signed away his life to tend the wounds of murdering outlaws whose cruel ultimatum was: "To hell with your patients—we want to live!"

A PECULIAR hush lay upon Sycamore town. Main Street was almost deserted of humans, but a number of horses dozed at hitchrails. Blurred pictures showed behind windows, as faces kept peering into the town. When men did step outside they were edgy. Those who occasionally moved along side-

walks, did so stiltedly. In front of the A-1 Saloon four gun-hung men squatted with backs to the adobe wall, smoking cigarettes. They simulated easy indifference, but their eyes were watchful.

On the porch of the town marshal's office a lean man sat tilted back in a hide-bottomed chair, idly whittling on a pine



Jim Strobe instinctively slapped iron—then remembered Doc's words.

stick. His bright eyes were constantly flickering beneath the lowered brim of his Stetson. About him was a manner of complete preparedness.

Above the top of a pine false-front protruded a bronzed face topped by a dun Stetson. Now and then sunlight ran along a rifle barrel up there. The guard was sitting on the ridge of the building. Diagonally across the street from him a second lookout was similarly stationed.

The quiet was monotonous, dreary, grimly portentous; like some enormous power which is the more dreaded because the time and the manner of its striking is unknown.

A chunky Mexican came out of Moreno's saddle shop and started slanting for the A-1 Saloon. He moved with short, jerky steps, like a furtive cat. He was startled to a rigid halt in the middle of the street. For about ten pulse-beats he stood there, listening; then whirled and sped back to the saddle shop, paunch bouncing above his red sash like a goat-skin water-case.

Jiminez Moreno wasn't a coward; simply a nervous man. From somewhere beyond the two-story town hall a swift patter of hoofs sounded.

Blurred pictures flurried behind window panes. Down at the marshal's office a chair came down fast and bootsoles hit the porch floor. The men in front of the A-1 rose with hurried precision and scattered, hands on six-shooters.

The stillness and the tension gripped more tightly; then around a corner of the town hall came a buckboard drawn by a sweaty team. Behind the vehicle trotted a saddled horse.

The whole town seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. Then Marshal Sim McCabe called out, his voice loud there in the stillness: "Hell, it's only Doc Hollis and Jim Strobe."

"And that little rooster, Danny," the guard atop Abernathy's General Store

called down in a curiously relieved voice.

Doc Hollis was a gaunt man, dressed carelessly in baggy store clothes. Strobe was a healthy man, too big for his clothes. He sat humped on the seat, hugging a bundle in his arms. The bundle was ten-year-old Danny Strobe. His little face was flushed with fever. The half closed eyes which looked up at his big brother were dull and glazed. Danny was another victim of the malady which threatened the community. Doc had ordered him quarantined.

The tawny haired cowboy sensed that peculiar atmosphere. His gaze roved swiftly. "Something's in the air, Doc," he said. "I feel it. Something threatening. Main Street is nearly deserted, and the gents that are on it look more like guards than idlers."

"The concern," Hollis explained morosely, "is on account of the epidemic. It's killed four town people, already. I'm damned glad we brought Danny here in time."

The bundle in Strobe's arms stirred. Danny wanted to look down Main Street. Big Jim grinned twistedly and passed off Doc's glum words with: "You see, young feller, you're the center of public attention."

Danny smiled. "You mean," he piped, "the town has sorta perked its ears on my account, huh, Jim?" He was thrilled at the thought of being the object of general attention, regardless of the cause.

"Yeah," Strobe told him, "but you don't want that kind of interest, buckaroo; not a big feller like you. We're not going to have people thinking there's a sickling in the Strobe family."

"No siree," Danny declared. He struggled to sit up, but Jim pressed him down.

"Take it easy! That's the quickest way to get well! You know—like a racehorse resting up. And speaking of horses—that Star Three pinto's going to be wait-

ing for you when you come back home."

He looked at Danny tenderly, wondering if the boy *would* return home.

Danny was beaming. "Gosh, Jim, you're going to buy the pinto for me? You mean he'll be plumb all mine?"

"I'm trading for him, son, and—yeah, he'll be all yours."

Danny sank back, the rapt smile still on his face. "Gee, Bud, you're swell!"

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JIM swallowed hard, and gazed straight ahead. Hollis looked sideways at him. "Think a lot of that button, don't you, Jim?" he observed in an undertone.

"I think everything of him, Doc. I've been dad and big brother to him since pa died."

The driver swung the team to a hitch-rack in front of a building labeled: DOCTOR HOLLIS' HOSPITAL. "Take him right on in," Doc directed as he hitched the team.

Jim Strobe knew now that fear of epidemic was not wholly the cause of the tension which gripped Sycamore. He had glimpsed the guard a-top Abernathy's General Store. Jim didn't give much thought to it at the moment, though. He had Danny to worry about—and to him nothing else in all the world was half so important.

Hugging the boy to him, the cow-puncher stopped at the head of the white hospital ward. There was dumb distress in his eyes. Jim hated to think of Danny's becoming a member of this stricken group. Poor little button! He would have a tough time fighting it through.

There were six inmates there; an elderly couple, a Mexican girl, a Chinese laundryman, a scrawny hotel keeper, a gaunt ranchman. The couple lay quietly, eyes hot and glazed. The señorita tossed and moaned. The Chinaman was like a

figure carved from old ivory. The hotel keeper and the cattleman were asleep.

The doctor's wife, a serious blond woman in crisp white, was on duty as nurse. She had a bed ready, and she left the mumbling señorita to come forward.

"Lay him right there, Jim," she said. "How are you, Danny, darling?"

"I ain't a darling. I'm—I'm—Hey, Jim, I don't wanna be left here!"

There was a haunted look in the big, dark eyes as Jim laid him on the bed. And no wonder. This place was symbolic of sickness and death. Danny might have one or more corpses for company before long. Might have to lie in a chill aura, constantly reminded that he, too, might become a pallid, rigid, lifeless thing.

"Listen, old-timer." Jim's voice was hoarse. "You wouldn't want to scatter contagion around, would you? So you just take 'er easy here in quarantine. Remember, quicker you get well, quicker you'll be riding that pinto."

This time the appeal did not bring an eager shine of anticipation to the thin face. Danny grabbed one of Jim's hands in both his own. "But, Jim," he pleaded, "you—you won't go plumb away?"

"I'll stick around," Strobe said. "Shucks, a man like you don't need a nursemaid."

Doc came to the bedside with a glass. "Here, sonny, drink this."

The boy looked askance at Jim. The cowboy nodded and Danny drank. . . .

As Jim sat holding Danny's hand and watching the boy's eyelids grow heavy, he thought again of the strained stillness outside. He looked up at the nurse.

"The guards," he said. "How come?"

"The Kelton gang," the woman said slowly. . . .

Danny was asleep. Jim tucked a hot little hand under a sheet and got to his feet. His gaze hung on that of the woman. Doc, too, was looking at her.

The Kelton gang. God!

"Marshal Sim McCabe," Mrs. Hollis went on, "got a tip they're in the vicinity, and possibly intending to raid our bank. But they'll get a hot reception."

"I hope there'll be no shooting," Doc said anxiously. "These patients shouldn't be excited. How are they, Elsa?"

He moved slowly away with her to visit each of them in turn. Jim took another look at Danny, then went out onto the sidewalk and stood there, eyeing the town while he built a cigarette. . . .

Four men squatted on their spurs in front of the A-1 Saloon; a guard a-top Abernathy's; another on this side of the street. Yes, Sycamore was prepared all right; but Jim hoped earnestly that there would be no raid.

Standing there before the clinic, Jim Strobe wondered bitterly why it was that humanity must be cursed with plagues. Already there were four fresh graves up yonder on the knoll. There would be more very soon, unless the serum which was expected today arrived on time. There was but one train a day from each direction. If the serum didn't come in today at sundown, there wouldn't be another chance for at least twenty-four hours. Some patients wouldn't last that long. There would be more fresh graves on the knoll, and one of them might be Danny's.

The thought tore cruelly at the cowboy. And now this added fear—the Keltons.

A sheeted spring-wagon was rolling into town, dust rising lazily from patting hoofs. A saddled horse trotted along behind. A man in ragged clothes was hunched on the seat, chin on breast.

"It's the old wolf-trapper who's been camped on Clear Creek. Drunk again, apparently." Doc had come quietly out of the clinic and was standing on the doorstep. "I wonder why the saddled mount?"

The nags slanted for a hitchrack, apparently of their own volition. The driver seemed to pay no heed.

From the hospital came a delirious wail. The Mexican girl was having a nightmare. Jim worried that Danny might be waked and frightened. He and the doctor turned, then froze.

The covered wagon had stopped directly in front of the bank. Men were pouring from beneath the canvas cylinder and into the building—bad looking gents with guns in their hands.

"The Keltons!" Jim blurted.

"A damn neat trick!" Doc said tautly. "The town doesn't even suspect! The bandits are screened by the wagon!"

"Look!" Strobe rapped, and pointed.

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A RIDER with six saddled mounts in tow had come out of some mesquites and was hurrying toward town, attempting to use a deserted building to cover his approach.

Jim Strobe instinctively slapped iron—then remembered Doc's words: "No shooting. No excitement." If Jim didn't start it there might not be any. And yet the bank was being robbed. If he didn't give the alarm the bandits would succeed. If he did give it, Danny, the other sick. . . .

He didn't have to make a decision. A wild clangor began down near the bank. Mrs. Hollis was in the clinic doorway now. "A holdup alarm!" she said quickly. "Banker Lansing strung cowbells along an outside wall, then ran a cord to his desk!"

The four men in front of the A-1 were almost falling over one another in their scramble to unleather their guns. Marshal McCabe's chair catapulted him across the porch. The two building guards swung up their rifles.

The rattle of cowbells ceased abruptly.

A pistol coughed within the bank. A whimpering moan came out of the hospital. Jim started to go inside, but Doc shoved him back.

"Stay out!" he rasped. "I'll attend!" The door closed behind him and his wife. Jim heard the bolt slide home.

The man on the spring seat of the wagon had jerked up his head, yanked a rifle from a hidden scabbard. He flung its stock to his right shoulder and pointed the muzzle toward the advancing marshal. Two Winchesters and McCabe's pistol spoke in chorus. Jim saw now that the driver was not the wolf-trapper. The oldster's wagon and team had been stolen for this coup.

McCabe was falling, crumpling like a bag of wetwash. His gun flew out of his hand and he went down, to lie twisted and still in the thick dust.

The disguised driver's Stetson twitched, and he pitched sidewise and dropped his Winchester. It bounced over the dashboard, struck one of the nags, then clattered to the ground. The team bolted. The erstwhile driver tumbled over the right wheel, did a complete somersault, then hit the ground and lay spread-eagled. The snorting team charged into an alley. There was a terrific, rending crash.

Men swarmed out of the bank. The cowbells were in wild rataplan again. And Doc had said there should be no undue excitement! Jim wished desperately that he could stop it, but anything he might do toward that end would only add to the hullabaloo. And Jim Strobe, who had scarcely known the meaning of prayer until this day, prayed silently for his little brother.

The gang hesitated, dismayed at first to find no mounts. But those experienced gunfighters were quick to recover. Their leader bawled an order and they made for an adobe building, shooting as they ran.

Window panes were blasted out. Bul-

lets ripped into wood. A-top Abernathy's General Store the guard somersaulted over a false front, thudded heavily upon a slanted wooden awning, went tumbling to the ground. Within the A-1 Saloon a man bawled in pain. Window glass and sashing flew onto the sidewalk as he lunged. Now the body hung across the sill, arms and head dangling, crimson pattering onto the boardwalk.

Even in their desperate predicament the outlaws were efficient. Although firing at a run, they killed three men within a twinkling. Doubtless Banker Lansing, too, had been shot. Those killers were savagely courageous, dangerous as a bunch of cornered tigers.

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FIRED with an impulse to join in the battle, Jim Strobe drew his gun and threw down on the tall leader—but the gun swung downward, returned to holster. He had remembered Danny. He must avoid bringing lead in the kid's direction.

The remaining house-top guard could no longer see the robbers. The four men in front of the A-1 Saloon were hugging posts and corners as they blasted away. Other guns were booming from windows and doors.

The adobe structure quick-wittedly chosen as a fort by the bandit leader was a relic from the days when Sycamore had been a pony express station. The thing had four adobe walls which enclosed fairly large grounds. Loopholes were plentiful.

The outlaws were at the yawning gateway, jamming themselves through. The rearmost member of the pack crumpled under the fire of the town fighters. A man turned, cursing luridly, grabbed him—then the whole gang was out of sight. A storm of lead swept through the opening.

Suddenly all firing ceased. Dust-haze drifted lazily. There was a queer silence, as if everyone was awed, and wondering what to do next. Incongruously, a locust began a monotonous, tinny *churring* in a cottonwood tree at the far end of town.

It had all happened with stunning speed. Now the unnatural quiet was broken by a long-drawn and agonized: "Oh-h-h!" coming from the old pony express building.

Strope heard the swift tread of footsteps behind him. The clinic door opened. He turned anxiously. "How's the kid, Doc!" he clipped.

"Danny's still asleep," Hollis said. "The excitement hasn't done the others any good." The Doc paused, looked across at the adobe. Then: "That cry sounded like the wounded outlaw is pretty badly hurt."

"Don't waste concern on a tiger, Doc."

"He's not an animal, Jim, but a human being. I wish I could—"

"Forget it. They'd murder you if you tried to get in there."

A growing hum arose within the town. People were throwing off shock. Rage and initiative were taking its place. Standing there close to the front door, Jim and Doc saw armed men darting onto the street and finding sheltered places of vantage. Still there was no shooting. The quiet was a little weird. Now and then it was broken by the repeated: "*Oh-h-h!*"

"Those hombres are ham-strung!" Jim said, with grim satisfaction. "If they make a break they'll be mowed down, and if they stay they'll be stormed—"

"I'm not so sure they won't escape," Hollis said slowly. "A concerted rush would wipe them out, true, but at what a terrible cost. Every man of that band is cold-nerved, vicious, deadly. They'd make each shot count. Within two hours there'll be a moonless night. If they can hold out until dark they may be able to shoot their way through."

A bare-headed clerk looked out of the bank—like a wary prairie dog up for a look-see. "Need me down there?" Doc called.

"We need an undertaker," the clerk hollered. "Lansing's dead."

A yowl of agony floated over the adobe wall. Again concern showed in Doc's brooding eyes. "It's my duty to aid the wounded, no matter who—"

A bullet slapped through a window pane to his right. Strope threw a hand to his gun. "Stop it, you hellions!" he roared. "This is a hospital!"

Another shot answered him, and Doc snapped: "Inside, quick!" He whirled to face the door. A rasping shout stopped him.

"Hold it there!" The voice came from within the fort. "You a sawbones?"

Doc hesitated for perhaps ten seconds. Then: "Yes, I'm Doctor Hollis."

"You're needed here," the Kelton man bellowed. "Git your things and come a-lopin'. Hurry it up—unless you want a whole mess of lead thrown into your damned hospital."

"All right! I'll come! Just hold everything!" Hollis hurried inside the hospital."

When he came back his wife was with him. She was pale, anxious, but she merely said, "Be careful, John." Then she kissed him.

"I'll go with you," Jim said quickly. It was terribly important that Hollis came back in time to administer the serum. Strope was going to try to make sure that he did.

Hollis gave him a curious look, then said, "All right, let's go."

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IN STILTED cadence, elbow to elbow, the two men strode along. People watched them in silence. The bare-headed clerk down at the bank

yapped: "I wouldn't do it, Hollis! Those skunks'll murder you when you're through! Or—"

A six-shooter thundered and the slug drove the clerk back into his hole.

"He may be right, at that," Strobe whispered.

The two men reached the gateway, passed through it. The atmosphere seemed as taut as a drumhead. The scuffing of their own boots was an inexplicably ominous sound. Jim's arteries were surging. There was an icy prickling along his spine; his brow was clammy, his throat dry.

Faces showed at loopholes. Cold, hard eyes bored out at the two men. They crossed the yard, stepped into the roofless adobe building, stood gazing in tight-lipped silence.

The bandit leader stood in the middle of the square. He was a tall man of gristle and rawhide; dressed in faded clothes and scarred red chaps. The wounded outlaw lay in a corner. The waist of his levis was soaked with blood. He looked up at Hollis in dumb misery, face ashen beneath its stubble of beard.

"I'm not a squawker, Doc," he snarled. "I've got guts. I could've stood the pain. I yowled just to help bring you down here."

Four other men, standing or squatted by loopholes, stared at the visitors silently. Jim Strobe had never seen a more savage lot.

The tall man was Jabe Kelton, the wounded one Seth Kelton, his cousin. Yonder were Angus Barton, Hefty Sloan, Frank Crill, and Bob Whitmore. It followed, then, that the two outlaws who had been killed were Bruno Hathaway and Orville Tate. Several times Jim Strobe had seen dodgers carrying pictures and descriptions of the whole gang.

Jabe Kelton took the cowboy's gun, patted both the visitors for other weapons. Then his bloodshot eyes bored Jim anew

as he growled: "What the hell did you tag along for?"

"To help me," Doc supplied.

"You're liable to wish you hadn't." Then, to Doc: "See what you can do for my cousin."

The examination was quickly made. Standing behind the doctor, Jim saw the bared area was a bloody horror. The A rifle bullet had punched into the outlaw's right flank, slanted downward and torn out at the left hip-joint. The whole bared area was a bloody horror. The man was in agony. His teeth were grinding, his face contorting; and sweat bathed his forehead.

Doc stood up. "I doubt if I can save him. Even if I can, he'll be a cripple for life. His bowels are punctured, and the slug shattered the whole socket assembly as it smashed out through that hip."

Jabe Kelton stood there gazing at the bared loins, and the king wolf's mouth was a cold, bitter line amidst the bush of his whiskers. His flinty eyes flicked up, then, and looked into the questioning ones of his cousin.

Startled fear rushed over Seth Kelton's face. He said hoarsely, "I'll make it, Jabe! To hell with what the doc says, I—"

"Uh-uh, Seth, no man could make it, shot up like you are." Jabe's gaunt face hardened in an expression of utter cold-bloodedness, and his right hand reached deliberately for his sidegun.

"No, Jabe!" Seth screamed. "Not that! Don't shoot me! Gawd, feller, I'm your own blood kin! I tell you I can pull through! Even if I lose a leg—"

Jabe clicked the Colt to a full cock. "It's for two reasons, Seth—mercy, and to make sure you don't talk. The rest of us wouldn't want people to know where our holeup places are."

"I won't talk!" Seth was panting now. "I'm no rat! You ought to know—"

"Tortured like you are, you'd break.

Besides, my way is better than going to the pen, and on through life a cripple. So—"

Strope blew his cork then. "You can't do that, you damned—" Bare-handed he lunged at Jabe.

Jabe cursed, struck a vicious sidewise blow. The Colt barrel slammed against Jim's blunt chin and knocked him down. He saw the gun move again to line on Seth's head.

"Hold it!" Hollis snapped. "Maybe after all I—I can fix him up so you can take him away."

Kelton's inhuman eyes turned upon the sawbones. "You know damned well you can't. Even if you could, he wouldn't be able to ride with us—ever. Hell, man, I'm not a fool."

He glanced down the Colt's barrel.

Seth Kelton screamed just two words: "No-o! Don't!"

The gun boomed and the slug smashed through Seth Kelton's skull. He fell back on the ground, gave a long, convulsive shudder—then was dead.

Strope got up from the ground, sleeving blood from his chin and swearing huskily. "You ain't human! You're a dirty, murdering—" He caught his breath. The round, dark eye of Kelton's heavy gun was staring into his face.

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BEETLE-BROWED, dour Hefty Sloan interrupted. "Hold it, Jabe," he said quickly. "We can use him, along with the sawbones."

Jabe's eyes glittered as he nodded. The gun lowered.

"What do you mean, use us?" Doc said sharply. "Listen, you wolves, I've seven patients in my hospital. They need—"

"To hell with 'em!" Jabe cracked out. "You gents are going to be our tickets out of this trap. Besides, Doc, we'll be

needing you some more. I've got a slash across my shoulders, and Crill is nussing a thigh wound."

Strope and Hollis looked at each other dumbly. Both would have liked to be in a position to fight, but they were sensible enough to realize that they must acquiesce. Other precious lives depended on Doc's safe return to the hospital.

The desperadoes left their erstwhile pal's body there as callously as if it were a cast-off article of equipment. Jim gave the grisly form a last glance as he and Doc went through the doorway.

Within the yard Jabe Kelton stopped. "You'll lead the way," he directed. "Once outside, holler that you're going with us as hostages. Make your talk convincing, for if your friends open up on us you're gone ducks. Now git going."

Beside the gateway the closely packed group stopped. Jabe shoved the prisoners into the open. For just an instant a chill held Jim Strope. There had been a humming within the town, but it had stopped suddenly. Now, in a calm, clear voice, Doc Hollis explained the situation. The angry buzzing broke out again, but Doc quieted it.

"They'll murder us, like Jabe did Seth Kelton, if you try to stop them," he warned. "Then what would become of people in the hospital?"

The bandits crowded outside, then with a gun-menaced captive on each side of the band they started hurriedly yet coolly for their horses. Doc was carrying his black satchel.

While a sullen quiet hung over Sycamore, the owlhooters captured their scattered horses and straddled leather.

"Mount the dead wrangler's horse double," Jabe growled at the prisoners. When they had obeyed, he lifted his voice and bawled to the town: "If anybody tries to foller us, we'll shoot these two hombres."

Strope was filled with growing worry

as the cavalcade dusted on. How far did the outlaws mean to take Doc and him before releasing them?

He was about to voice a protest when Jabe called a halt beside a creek. There had been no sign of pursuit, but Kelton sent Hefty Sloan to a rimrock to take a look-see.

Jim helped Doc take care of the two wounded outlaws. As Hollis rolled up his sleeves he looked at Jabe.

"You'll release us as soon as we're through with this job, of course. But how about letting us ride back on the extra horse?"

Kelton smiled bitterly, "Don't take so much for granted, sawbones," he rasped.

"It's damned urgent that I be in Sycamore by sundown," Hollis said. "There are pestilence victims in the hospital who must have serum treatment or die."

"To hell with your pest victims," Kelton said. "We're thinking of ourselves. Come on, fix up these wounds!"

△ △ △

THE wounded men sat on the creek bank, their pards farther back, watchful. Jim and Doc knelt by the black satchel. Doc opened it—and Jim's heart leaped into his throat. Nestling in a side pocket was a short revolver. Their eyes met briefly, but without decision.

They took care of Jabe first. Doc reasoned and pleaded further, until the outlaw cursed him to silence. Doc's lips were tight when he rose and went to Crill.

He cleaned the thigh wound and told Jim to bandage it; then he picked up a bottle, gave the cowboy a meaning glance, headed for the satchel. Jim felt for a certainty that the cool-nerved physician was going for the gun; that he meant to try to capture Jabe, and command of the situation. Jim's heart was ice. He mustn't let Doc take such a risk! If the trick

failed, Doc might be murdered, and that was exactly what Jim had come along to prevent!

His brain raced wildly, then came inspiration—he thought. "You can't get away with it!" he rapped, both for Doc and for the gang. Then, for the gang only: "Pestilence will kill every damn one of you. It's damned contagious! You'll die like flies!"

"What you mean, we've been exposed?" Kelton blasted. "We didn't git near any pest victims."

"We've had plenty near us," Strobe clipped. "Our clothes are loaded with germs. We've spent hours with victims, even held 'em in our arms."

Doc was gazing at Jim intently. Jabe began cursing. Crill said sharply, "The sawbones mentioned a preventive serum. Make him shoot us with that stuff."

"Doc has a hypo," Strobe put in. "Show 'em the bottle you had at Danny's bedside, Doc. Kelton, promise to let us go soon as the job's finished, and you'll get the shots. Eh, Doc?"

Hollis nodded. His dark eyes were burning with understanding now. The bottle contained a powerful sleep producer, not serum.

"Not so fast men," Kelton said. "How do we know what's in the bottle? How do we know it ain't some deadly stuff? You're giving us a sample, Doc. Yeah, shoot some of it into yourself."

Jim was silently cursing himself for a fool. The scheme had backfired. His brain whirled desperately for an instant. Then he blurted: "Doc has taken two—three shots already. More would make him break out in sores, even affect his ticker."

Jabe's narrowed eyes were cold with suspicion. "Yeah? Then we'll just use you for the guinea pig. Get out your needle, Doc."

"Sure," Doc said. But as the dark eyes met Jim's anxious blue ones, the

cowboy knew that Hollis was going for the snub revolver.

Again Jim told himself wildly that he must not let Doc get killed. He moved forward quickly. He was planning that as soon as he was close to Jabe Kelton he would throw himself upon the man.

Closer, closer; Jim's heart was still and cold! He must not fail! Doc was reaching into the satchel. All eyes were watching him.

It was then that the lookout on the rimrock called. "Hey, men! There's a posse comin'! I see riders sneakin' among the trees!"

The four desperadoes had jerked their faces toward the rimrock—and Jim Strobe lunged.

Kelton cursed, ripped out his gun, but Jim slapped the weapon aside. It crashed, and a man cried out in agony.

Frank Crill, shot by accident, was falling. The other men were crouched, bringing up their guns. Jim had closed with Kelton. He swung the man around, tried to use him as a shield. Perhaps Angus Barton and Bob Whitmore shot their boss

deliberately, so as to get at Jim Strobe and out of this suddenly alarming situation. Anyway, their guns spoke, and Jim felt the long form go suddenly limp in his arms.

He tore Jabe's gun away, shoved it past the wilting form. Barton and Whitmore were still driving lead into Kelton. Evidently they had counted Doc out of it. But suddenly the gaunt, store-clad man was shooting. He must have aimed deliberately, for Bob Whitmore went down. Jim shot Angus Barton in the belly.

Just that one explosive outburst, then the battle was over. Jim dropped his slack and bloody human burden. Together he and Doc rushed to consolidate their victory. Up on the rim there was a pattering of hoofs, but Hefty Sloan wasn't coming to take up the fight; he was getting the hell out of that country.

Jim Strobe was battle-shocked, yet quietly glad. Doc would get back in time to administer the mercy shots. Little Danny and the other patients would be saved, epidemic halted, and the notorious Kolton gang delivered to a justice that waited in Boothill.

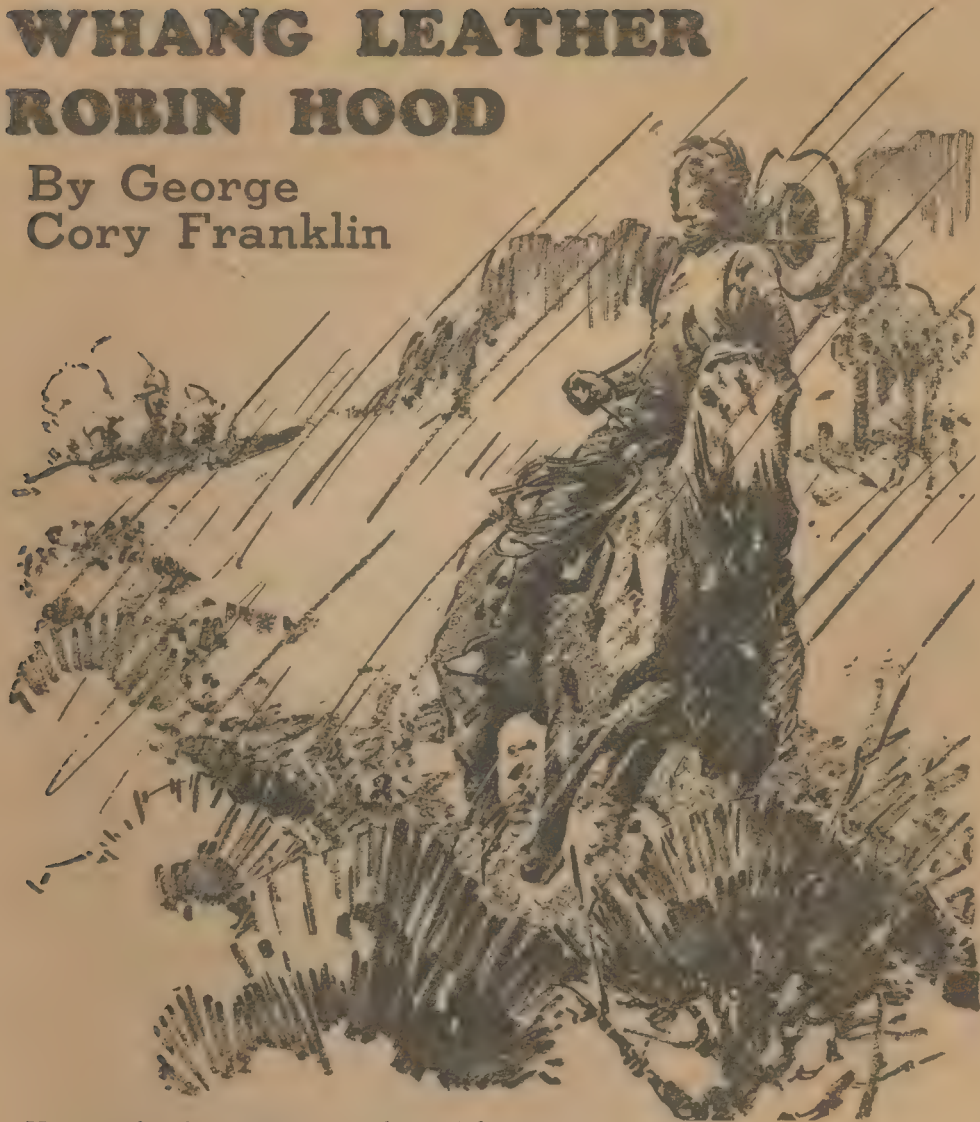
WESTERN BRAIN-TWISTERS

(Answers to Questions on page 37)

1. The name was applied to Indian moccasins.
2. The Petrified Forest lies in Arizona.
3. The uplands of the Dakotas are not black. The name was derived from their resemblance to the old-time hearse. From a distance the trees on the summits resembled black plumes on hearses.
4. The State of Kansas.
5. During the spring season cattle often became mired down in water holes and river bottoms. Usually two men are assigned to work the range together, on the lookout for bogged stock. Their duty is to rope these critters and pull them back to firm ground.
6. John Adair, of Rathdairs, Ireland. Adair put in \$74,000 as his share of Goodnight's Palo Duro ranch, which later became the famous J. A. outfit of Texas.
7. The forerunner of the present day dress shirt was called a "dickey." It was an inseparable part of the gambler's dress.
8. When the animal is in action, pressure on the frog causes the blood to circulate through the critter's limbs.
9. Billy the Kid was left-handed, but ambidextrous in the use of guns.
10. A cowboy named White who, seeing huge clouds of bats winging their way out of a rocky opening, investigated and thus found the historic caves.
11. Placerville was known as Hangtown. It was here that vigilantes hanged a number of men caught robbing sluice boxes.
12. The cowboy's rope is usually 45 feet in length and made of hard, twisted manila rope. The vaquero uses a 60-foot length of rawhide called a riata.
13. Writers of Western history have, at times, mentioned such a trail, but so far as records show no trail was ever so named for Joseph McCoy, the man most instrumental in promoting the great cattle market at Abilene, Kansas.
14. The large skinning outfits engaged several expert shots whose duty was to follow and shoot down the buffalo. The Skinner who followed and completed the job on the animal was called the "dropper."
15. Sometimes, in August, rabies are prevalent among the dog family. During this period it is not uncommon for coyotes to attack almost anything.

WHANG LEATHER ROBIN HOOD

By George
Cory Franklin



He narrowly missed capture by a band of furious cattlemen.

The Rio Grande's Robin Hood blazed a strange, twisted trail to outlaw glory. But how could he hope to beat six steel-jacketed tickets to Boothill—with nothing more than a honkatonk billiard cue?

BECAUSE the lives of Western men depended largely on their ponies, horse stealing was considered a major crime. The profits were large, a sound young saddle horse frequently bringing as much as five hundred dollars in California gold.

Among the gents who risked their necks in this rustling traffic was one Arnold Howard, who was regarded as a sort of frontier Robin Hood. He had been known to strip his saddle from a fine horse and exchange the animal for a broken-down nag belonging to some poor

pilgrim. Then, at the nearest settlement, Howard at once stole a good new mount and went on his roistering way, preying wherever possible on the rich and spending money lavishly on the poor.

Howard had many friends among the "underprivileged," and it was said that whenever he entered one of the villages along the upper Rio Grande, his every movement was protected by people he had in some way helped. On one occasion he narrowly missed capture by a band of furious cattlemen, but he later found sanctuary in a peon's isolated adobe.

Howard was married to a highly respected woman who, though she deplored his reckless career, nevertheless loved him greatly.

Mrs. Howard lived in a small cottage in Del Norte, the oldest town north of Taos, in the San Luis Valley, where her husband visited her frequently. And although officers watched the trails leading into the town, so highly was Mrs. Howard respected that her home was never molested, even when her husband was known to be in the vicinity.

Because of the protection given him in the small Mexican plazas, Howard operated with bold daring from as far south as Santa Fe, clear to the Five Rivers country, now known as the San Juan Basin.

In the summer of 1882 he rode into Del Norte, left his horse hidden among the cottonwoods in the river bottom, and visited several friends on the outskirts of the village. About eight o'clock at night he was seen on the street near his wife's cottage by a man named Jackson, an outlaw who had been terrorizing small towns in the eastern part of the valley.

Jackson, jealous of Howard's popularity and seeming immunity from the law, followed Howard into a billiard room. Howard was an expert billiard

player, and passionately fond of the game. Jackson went up an alley and entered through a back door.

Howard had taken off his coat and vest and had laid them, with his gun, on a chair near the wall. It looked like an easy killing for Jackson, who slouched forward to the end of the table, spewing abuse and threats. Howard paid no attention to the mouthings of his enemy. He made three cushion shots until he gained the desired position. Then he suddenly sprang forward—the small end of a heavy cue pointed at Jackson's mouth.

Jackson fired from the hip, but evidently his nervousness caused him to miss. As quick as lightning Howard jammed the billiard cue down his foe's throat to his vitals. Then he coolly put on his hat and coat, paid the bartender for his game and walked out.

In this sort of temper, Howard was as dangerous as a cornered lobo. He would have killed as ruthlessly as any savage, and the Del Norte marshal, himself a fearless man, realized it. Besides, he felt that Howard had freed the valley of a menace in killing Jackson. He made no attempt to arrest Howard, who walked down one side of the street, crossed over and came up the other, stood on the corner and watched two men carry Jackson's body away, then disappeared.

The following day, two cowboys riding in from an up-river ranch, saw the tracks of Howard's horse turn into a trail leading up the South Fork toward Pagosa Springs, on the other side of the Continental Divide.

About a month after Jackson's death, Mrs. Howard left the village, but whether she joined her outlaw husband or not was never learned. But there was a story that Howard went on West to a Mormon village on the San Juan, where he took up a homestead and became a respected citizen.

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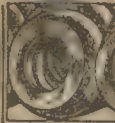
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BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
28x4.50-20	1.95	
30x4.50-21	1.95	
32x4.75-19	1.85	
34x4.75-20	2.10	
36x5.00-20	2.25	1.00
38x5.00-20	2.40	1.00
38x5.25-18	2.45	1.15
38x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
38x5.25-20	2.45	1.15
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38x5.25-96	2.45	1.15
38x5.25-97	2.45	1.15
38x5.25-98	2.45	1.15
38x5.25-99	2.45	1.15
38x5.25-100	2.45	1.15

TRUCK BALLOONS

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	3.35	
7.00-20	4.60	
7.50-20	5.15	
8.25-20	6.75	

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	\$1.95	
7.00-20	2.75	
7.50-20	3.15	
8.25-20	3.95	
9.00-20	4.60	
9.50-20	5.15	
10.00-20	5.70	
10.50-20	6.25	
11.00-20	6.80	
11.50-20	7.35	
12.00-20	7.90	
12.50-20	8.45	
13.00-20	9.00	
13.50-20	9.55	
14.00-20	10.10	
14.50-20	10.65	
15.00-20	11.20	
15.50-20	11.75	
16.00-20	12.30	
16.50-20	12.85	
17.00-20	13.40	
17.50-20	13.95	
18.00-20	14.50	
18.50-20	15.05	
19.00-20	15.60	
19.50-20	16.15	
20.00-20	16.70	
20.50-20	17.25	
21.00-20	17.80	
21.50-20	18.35	
22.00-20	18.90	
22.50-20	19.45	
23.00-20	20.00	
23.50-20	20.55	
24.00-20	21.10	
24.50-20	21.65	
25.00-20	22.20	
25.50-20	22.75	
26.00-20	23.30	
26.50-20	23.85	
27.00-20	24.40	
27.50-20	24.95	
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28.50-20	26.05	
29.00-20	26.60	
29.50-20	27.15	
30.00-20	27.70	
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31.50-20	29.35	
32.00-20	29.90	
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55.50-20	55.75	
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56.50-20	56.85	
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64.00-20	65.10	
64.50-20	65.65	
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65.50-20	66.75	
66.00-20	67.30	
66.50-20	67.85	
67.00-20	68.40	
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83.50-20	86.55	
84.00-20	87.10	
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(Continued from page 92)

"You've had a knot up your craw ever since I rode into camp last night, Bentley," Lew observed coolly. "Only you been waitin' for somethin'. You come close to draggin' your shootin' iron last night. What held you back? You waitin' for the Kid here to look me over?"

"You're a smart gent, ain't you, Kavanagh?"

"You ain't doubtin' my say-so, are you, Cass?"

The outlaw leader looked from the long-barreled gun in Lew's right hand to Ike Moody's inscrutable mask of a face, then back again to Lew's gun. He lifted his shoulders.

"The Kid's word is good enough for me, Kavanagh," he said.

"We'll let 'er ride like that," Lew said quietly. But he shifted the fully-loaded gun in his left hand holster over to the right side before breaking the cylinder of the gun in his hand to reload it. And he knew that this was no more than a brief truce forced upon Bentley because he was not sure which way Ike Moody would lean in a showdown.

Ike stuck out his left hand, pointing

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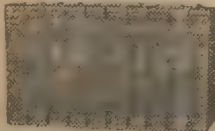
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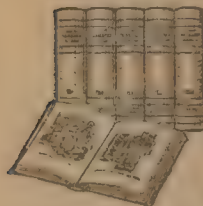
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Fighting Men of the Steel Trails

(Continued from page 106)

"You know who killed dad—and robbed the express safe?"

"It was Quick Jaeger," Moody said promptly. Lew detected a strange note in the other man's voice. "I guess it was my fault that he got into the express car with your pa. When the train stopped I figured mebbe trouble had come. But, hell, I figured it would hit us from the outside. I had my head stuck out of that damn chair-car window, watchin' 'em throw that herd of stuff across the right-of-way, and Quick must of got into the express car then. I could see it was Cass Bentley ridin' with them cows."

"How come Bentley knows you as the Utah Kid?"

"I don't reckon he did know who I was," Ike said slowly, "until I whistled." He added: "You'd of found out some day anyhow, I reckon, so I might as well tell you that I used to ride with Cass—before I started law work for Wells-Fargo."

Ike Moody continued, "I never did see Quick in the car with your pa, but I pulled my head in just in time to see somebody drop off the platform up there. At first I figured it was one of the passengers, but there was somethin' almighty familiar about the way he looked, so I took a gander through the little window in the express car door and seen your pa down and the safe open.

"It was then that I figured—rightly, so it turned out—that the jasper I seen on the platform was Quick Jaeger. When I got to the ground he was clear down at the end of the train and duckin' into the brush back there. He was too far away for a shot, and anyhow, I figured he would lead me to the real brains of the holdup. About a mile back up the track I'd seen a little two-bit outfit with a couple of hosses in the pen, so I went back up there and got a hoss and riffin'. When I got back

(Continued on page 110)

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110

Fighting Men of the Steel Trails

Moody said. Then Lew saw him stiffen slowly, staring toward the door of the cabin. Lew shifted his own glance. Cass Bentley stood there, staring at them.

"I'll take him now, Lew," said Ike.

"He's faster than you," Lew said.

Ike Moody's left hand lifted to the brim of his Stetson, shoved it over on one side at a jaunty angle. He watched Cass Bentley move toward them. Bentley spoke.

"You gents seem to be doin' a lot of augerin'—and not much grave-diggin'."

"You're uuder arrest, Cass," Ike Moody said.

"Say that again," Bentley whispered.

"I said you was under arrest," Ike repeated, "for robbin' the Sunset Limited of the Comstock necklace and killin' a Wells-Fargo express messenger."

Lew watched Cass Bentley's eyes stand wide in absolute amazement for a brief moment, then grow narrow.



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.44 WESTERN MAGAZINE

"You didn't actually kill that messenger," Ike went on grimly, "but Quick Jaeger did—and you've got the necklace now."

"Quick, you say? Quick give me—"

Cass Bentley laughed. But it was a coldly brittle sound, carrying thundering death as its climax. For Cass Bentley, possibly the fastest man with a gun along the Outlaw Trail, went for his hogleg. Lew saw the muzzle come up flaming. But then he saw something else, and he could not believe his eyes.

△ △ △

THE haft of a knife quivered in Bentley's wide chest. It quivered there while a flood of red rushed out to dye the outlaw leader's shirt with crimson. Bentley died on his feet, still trying unsuccessfully to lift the heavy gun in his right hand.

Ike Moody had thrown that knife . . . that was why he had reached toward his Stetson a moment ago . . . he must have carried the knife in a scabbard under the collar of his brush-coat, between his shoulder blades. And in that moment awful realization came to Lew.

Ike Moody had thrown that knife with his left hand . . . Quick Jaeger was right-handed . . . And Tom Kavanagh had been stabbed to death by a left-handed killer!

Lew struggled to mould his face into inscrutable lines to hide the torrent of thought racing through his mind: if Quick Jaeger actually killed Tom Kavanagh, how did he get a key to the express car? And how did he open the Wells-Fargo safe in the car without knowing the combination? For Lew was convinced that his dad would never have opened the safe for the outlaw, or revealed the combination. Only three men had been given keys to the express car for this trip: Tom Kava-

Fighting Men of the Steel Trails

nagh, Lew and Ike Moody. And both Lew and Ike knew the combination to the safe. Lew had shot the lock off the express car door only for the sake of haste, not because he lacked other means of entering.

Lew watched Ike Moody search Cass Bentley's pockets. The Wells-Fargo detective did not find anything of value in the pockets, but he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction when he pulled a money belt from around Bentley's waist. He opened the belt and Lew saw the great Comstock necklace. Ike Moody stood erect, holding the almost priceless treasure carefully, as if fearful that it would fall apart in his hands. He turned toward Lew, so that he stood no more than six feet away, beyond the shallow grave and Dude Henning's body beyond.

Ike Moody, Wells-Fargo detective! The Utah Kid. In this moment Lew knew that he stood face to face with the real killer of his dad. It was so plain to Lew now: Ike Moody, with his record for recovering stolen loot and wiping out the men who had pulled the jobs, had been diabolically clever. Lew stiffened. For Ike Moody was looking at him, and Lew knew that his eyes gave him away, for very slowly the hawk-faced man across the shallow grave slid the necklace into his pocket. His lips moved.

"What's eatin' you, Lew?" His voice was flat, dangerous.

"You knew he had that necklace. You gave it to him while I was unconscious."

"Meanin' just what?"

"Meanin' that you been damn clever," said Lew softly, "runnin' all these hold-up gangs into their holes. Every time, you've made sure you killed off every damn man-jack of them—but that ain't all you've done, by a long shot: You've found out about valuable shipments in advance—and you've arranged with them outlaw gangs to stage the holdup. Then you go

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WE PAY YOU \$5 for selling ten \$1 boxes, 50 distinctive assorted name imprinted Christmas cards. Sell \$1. You make 50c. Free Samples. Cheerful Card Co., 50 White Plains, N. Y.

Antiques—Indian Relics

Indian Relics, Coins, Curios. Catalog 5c. VERNON LEMLEY, OSBORNE, KANSAS.

Educational

Correspondence courses and educational books, slightly used. Sold. Rented. Exchanged. All subjects. Satisfaction guaranteed. Cash paid for used courses. Complete details and bargain catalog FREE. Write NELSON COMPANY, 500 Sherman, Dept. J-218, Chicago.

Female Help Wanted

SPECIAL WORK for women. Demonstrate lovely dresses in your home. Earn to \$18.00 weekly, get own dresses free. No investment. Give age, dress size. Fashion Frocks, Desk 23029, Cincinnati, O.

Hotel Training

HOTELS call for trained men and women. Good pay. Learn at home. Write Lewis Hotel Training Schools. Room ZP-7259, Washington, D. C.

Inventions Wanted

CASH FOR INVENTIONS, patented, unpatented. Mr. Ball, H-9441 Pleasant, Chicago.

Patents

INVENTORS—Protect your idea. Secure "Patent Guide"—Free. Write CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN, Registered Patent Attorney, 1326 Adams Building, Washington, D. C.

Personal

OLD FALSE TEETH look real with our life-like reproduction. Free booklet. BEAUTI-PINK CO., Dept. 19, Union City, N. J.

Photo Finishing

8 ENLARGEMENTS and film developed, 116 size or smaller, 25c coin; enlarged prints 3c each; special offer; enclose advertisement and negative for hand-colored enlargement free with order 25c or more. ENLARGE PHOTO, Box 791, Dept. PPM, Boston, Mass.

AT LAST, all your pictures Hand Colored. Roll developed, 8 Hand Colored prints, only 25c. Hand Colored reprints 3c. Amazingly Beautiful. National Photo Art, Dept. 182, Janesville, Wis.

EXCITING OFFERS: 8 prints—2 enlargements, 16 prints or 8 oversize prints 25c. Mailers Free—Work guaranteed. MAY'S PHOTO, Box 870-AJ, La Crosse, Wisconsin.

ROLLS DEVELOPED—25c coin. Two 5 x 7 Double Weight Professional Enlargements, 8 Gloss Deckle Edge Prints. CLUB PHOTO SERVICE, Dept. 16, La Crosse, Wis.

ROLLS DEVELOPED—16 Artistic Permanent prints only 25c. Reprints 2c. Superior developing and printing. MID-WEST PHOTO SERVICE, Dept. 5132, Janesville, Wis.

Poems—Songwriters

WANTED—Poems for musical setting. Submit for consideration. Phonograph transcriptions made. Rhyming Pamphlet FREE. Keenan's Studio, PP, Box 2140, Bridgeport, Conn.

POEMS WANTED for musical setting. Submit for Free examination. VANDERBILT MUSIC STUDIO, Box 112, Coney Island, N. Y.

SONG POEMS WANTED. Free examination. Send poems. McNeil, Master of Music, 510-A South Alexandria, Los Angeles, Calif.

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after them—which ain't no chore, considerin' that you know where they'll hole up anyway, like you knowed about Cass Bentley there—you go after them and the first thing everybody knows you've turned up with the loot and a story of how you killed off the gang—"

"Cass was right," murmured Ike Moody. "You are a smart gent—"

"And every time," continued Lew, "you've collected a nice fat reward, like you would of done this time, too, if you'd shot Cass Bentley instead of throwin' that knife at him. And you'd of had me, another Wells-Fargo man, to side you when you told your story." Lew's voice sharpened. "I'm givin' you a chance, Moody, but you'll have to use a gun this time—" Then he was reaching for his gun.

Ike Moody's gun thundered but the lead dug a slanting hole in the near wall of the grave, and before the man could pull trigger a second time Lew's lead slammed him back on his heels. Then he was down, falling across Dude Henning's still figure. Lew saw the Comstock neck-lace fall out of his pocket to lie across his still hand.

Lew murmured through the climbing streamers of muzzle smoke, "Everything's all right, Dad. You finished your last run with your record clean."

THE END

Classified Advertising

(Continued)

SONGWRITERS—Send poems for offer and FREE Rhyming Dictionary. RICHARD BROTHERS, 30 Woods Building, Chicago.

Songwriters. Interesting Proposition. Write PARAMOUNT SONG-RECORDING STUDIO, L-61, Box 190, Hollywood, Calif.

SONGWRITERS—Write for free booklet, Profit Sharing Plan. Allied Songs, 7608 Reading, Cincinnati, Ohio

SAVE MONEY! Learn Song Poem REQUIREMENTS first! SONG SERVICE, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York

Prize Contests

ESSAY CONTEST! Cash Prizes. Investigate. Papers free. Box 5386, Chicago.

Tattooing Supplies

START profitable Tattooing and Removing Business. Free instructions. Write "TATTOO," 661 South St. Chicago.

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